

Toll's Colonial Library

**The Romance of
Mademoiselle Aïssé**



*This Edition is issued for
circulation in the Colonies
and India only*

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

DWELLERS BY THE RIVER

FUGITIVE ANN

THE OTHER MRS JACOBS

THE MAID OF THE RIVER

THE LUCK OF THE LEURA

STUBBLE BEFORE THE WIND

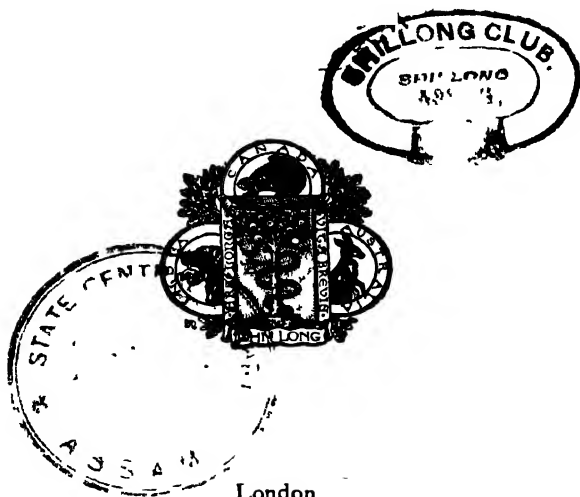
A SUMMER WREATH

JOHN LONG, LIMITED, LONDON

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aissé

By

Mrs Campbell Praed



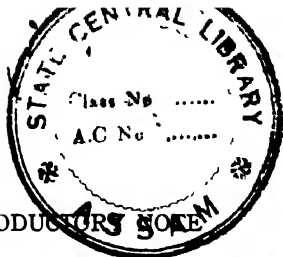
London

John Long, Limited

Norris Street, Haymarket

[All Rights Reserved]

First Published 1910



INTRODUCTORY

IN the following *Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé* it will be seen by readers acquainted with certain memoirs of the early part of the eighteenth century that I have drawn but very slightly upon imagination.

The actual story of this pathetic, though, as regards history, comparatively unimportant life is so dramatic that even for purposes of fiction it would need no alteration.

My Romance is, as it were, a piece of embroidery, of which all the pattern has previously been outlined and the leading stitches made, and in which I have only filled in small details and the subtler blends of colour.

Thus, where scenes and dialogues have been amplified or introduced, I have kept closely within the lines suggested by Mademoiselle Aïssé's biographers, and in her own letters to Madame Calandrini.

R. M. P.

Contents

BOOK I.—THE AMBASSADOR

CHAP	PAGE
I. THE SLAVE-MARKET	9
II. THE PURCHASER	17
III. THE HÔTEL DE FERRIOL	27
IV. THE ROSES OF ABLON	43
V. HIS EXCELLENCY	62
VI. THE CASKET	76
VII. THE WISTARIA	88
VIII. BROTHERS	107
IX. DEATH IN LIFE	12

BOOK II.—THE REGENT

I. THE PUPPETS PASS	143
II. THE LITTLE APARTMENTS	160
III. THE FAIR CIRCASSIAN	177
IV. THE ROYAL GARDEN-PARTY	187
V. EMILIE INTERVENES	197
VI. MADAME DE TENCIN OFFERS THE APPLE	212
VII. HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS	226
VIII. LOVE, THE LORD	241

Contents

BOOK III.—THE CHEVALIER

CHAP.	PAGE
I. LINKS IN THE CHAIN	257
II. CHEZ MADAME DU DEFFAND	274
III. PONT DE VEYLE LEADS TRUMPS	296
IV. THE MUEZZIN'S CALL	312
V. THE VOICE OF SPRING	328
VI. FRUITION	342
VII. FINGER-PRINTS OF TIME	358
VIII. ASHES OF ROSES	380

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

BOOK I.—THE AMBASSADOR

CHAPTER I

THE SLAVE-MARKET

MADemoiselle AÏSSÉ—"La chère Aïssé," "La belle Aïssé," "La pauvre Aïssé," "The Fair Circassian," and "The Charming Aïssé" of Bolingbroke's and Horace Walpole's letters. A delicate, shrinking figure, gliding unobtrusively through the corrupt circles of high society during the French Regency, tender, amiable, possessed of beauty and of a peculiar quiet charm, but without any strikingly individual claim to attention. It is in truth somewhat surprising that she should have found a place—as she has done—in most of the correspondence of her day. She was not learned, she was not witty; she was lacking, from the worldly point of view, in force of character; her letters are poor in style and show small trace of original thought. She was devoid of the clever versatility and fascinating extravagances of the women of that time and must have appeared almost insipid beside her friends, the gay Madame de Parabère—mistress of the Regent d'Orléans—and the brilliant Madame du Deffand, then in the earlier stages of her career.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

From the comments of Aïssé's contemporaries, one may be assured that she was beautiful, with her large almond-shaped, Oriental eyes beneath their finely-arched brows, her regular features, her grace of form and her exquisite complexion. Yet she speaks slightly of "such charms as I ever possessed," and it is clear that she had little vanity and no particular desire for general admiration. Her power seems to have lain chiefly in the sweetness of her disposition and the goodness of her heart. No one speaks ill of Aïssé—if one may except M. Capefigue's slighting mention of her in his short memoir of the Comtesse de Parabère—and Aïssé tries always in her letters to find some extenuating circumstances in the lapses from virtue of those she loves—notably Madame de Parabère herself—but of whose conduct she cannot approve. Above all, Aïssé appears to have had the art of inspiring affection, and in the one great passion of her life—her love for the Chevalier d'Aydie—proves herself to have been utterly disinterested. Aïssé's story, notwithstanding her fall, expiated by her bitter remorse, is emphatically that of a pure woman. The marvel is that amidst the dissolute society that surrounded her, and under a constant pressure of money difficulties, she should not have yielded to the baser influences by which she was beset. But though reared in a very hot-bed of corruption, the girl's virginal soul remained unsoiled. She has declared solemnly to her closest friend that she found it impossible to give herself where she could not feel respect. Money could not buy her. Difficult as it must have been to resist the Regent's splendid importunities and the persuasions of her natural protectress, Aïssé was true to herself. And she was proof alike against ambition and a sense of duty towards her guardian who had bought her and given her a luxurious bringing-up. For Aïssé there was but one compelling force.

Her life divides itself naturally into three portions.

The Slave-Market

each portion dominated by one man, each man representing a temptation to which most women would unhesitatingly have succumbed. These men were the Ambassador, the Regent, the Chevalier; the temptations they respectively embodied were Gratitude, Power and Love.

Love alone conquered Aïssé.

It has been said of her that she came into the world through the portal of romance. Oriental mystery envelops her antecedents. The curtain rises upon her in Constantinople—Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Constantinople—though as a matter of fact Mr Wortley Montagu was accredited to the Porte some eighteen years later than the date of Mademoiselle Aïssé's pitiful *début* into European civilisation.

But Constantinople was the same—built on its seven heights, in its setting of blue Bosphorus and Asian hills: a city of squalor and enchantment, as indeed it is at the present day. Lady Mary describes its confusion of buildings and colouring and the unevenness of its various levels—cypress gardens, palace towers, minarets and domes of mosques—in graphic, homely metaphor, as resembling the “contents of an inlaid china-cabinet, filled without regard to symmetry. Jars showing themselves above jars, mixed with canisters, babies and candlesticks. This is a very odd comparison,” she says, “but it gives me an exact image of the thing.”

One is inclined to linger a moment over Lady Mary's sprightly descriptions. Then as now, Pera was the Embassy quarter, and for Frank strangers there was some little danger in roaming Constantinople proper, though this daring Englishwoman, disguised in a *yashmak*, seems to have made herself fairly acquainted with such of its resorts as were open to her. She gives a vivid sketch of the Seraglio on its point running out into the sea, with its beautiful gardens, its spires and gilded

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

turrets and vast courts, "far more splendid than the palace of any Christian king; and," she adds, "beside the mosque of St Sophia, St Paul's church would make a very poor figure."

In the Turkish town, which gave Aïssé her first peep into the possibilities of Western life, lay all the strangeness and brutishness of the Orient. Easy to have fancied oneself back in the empire of ancient Rome. Here was a slave-market from which the harems were supplied with Asian odalisques and beautiful maidens from Circassia and Greece. Lady Mary tells of a commission to purchase a Greek slave for an English friend. Probably the ambassador's wife would have found a difficulty in carrying through the transaction. Anyhow, she sent her friend a Turkish love-letter as some compensation for not having complied with the request. But there were other Christian diplomatists of the times who did not scruple to avail themselves of the advantages of Eastern traffic in human flesh. One of these was Monsieur Charles de Ferriol, envoy to the Sultan from the court of Louis XIV. of France.

Thus it happened that one day in the year 1698 the French ambassador was taking a stroll through the Constantinople slave-market. Maybe it was a fashionable lounge and he turned in from mere habit or curiosity. Or may be he was in search of new beauty for his own delectation or that of his friends. There is a record in Barbier's *Journal* of M. de Ferriol having bought about this time a young female slave for the Comte de Bautru-Nogent, who afterwards married, or made an illegal attempt at marrying, the young woman—to his own discredit, the scandal of his relatives and the sorrow of the slave.

This fact is worth laying stress upon, for it must have had considerable influence upon Mademoiselle Aïssé's relations with the Chevalier d'Aydie. For the Bautru-Nogents were closely connected with the d'Aydie family, who

The Slave-Market

like many old families were interlaced by marriage with some of the greatest and most ancient names in France, and it can easily be understood that the proud and delicate-minded Aissé would have shrunk from bringing a scandal upon the Chevalier similar to that which his cousin of Bautru-Nogent had suffered.

Going back to the Ambassador de Ferriol—that elderly cosmopolitan aristocrat of the *ancien régime*—the casual comments of contemporaries and the account of one Paul Lucas—a traveller about that date in the dominions of the Sultan—give a sufficiently clear impression of this man who was the instrument of Fate to Aissé. For had not Monsieur the Comte de Ferriol walked through the slave-market that morning, Aissé would in all probability never have been heard of by the gossips and letter-writers of the eighteenth century.

Charles, Comte de Ferriol, Baron d'Argental, Privy Councillor and Ambassador-extraordinary of Louis XIV. to the Porte, was the younger brother to a less interesting but more frequently-mentioned person, Augustin de Ferriol of Chateau Pont de Veyle, near Bresse, and the Hôtel de Ferriol, Rue Neuve St Augustin in Paris, gentleman-financier, Councillor of the Parliament of Metz, and Receiver-General of the Taxes of the Province of Dauphiné—not the least part of whose notoriety was due to the fact that he had married a sister of Abbé de Tencin and of that subtle and unscrupulous lady, the celebrated ex-nun, Madame de Tencin.

Charles de Ferriol, in this year 1698, when Aissé's infant eyes first beheld him, was a little over fifty. As a youth, he had been a soldier and had gained distinction as a bold warrior. Later, he had gone into diplomacy, where it was said that his methods were a little too martial. Nevertheless he appears to have enjoyed the confidence of his sovereign and, in spite of an imperious temper, to have been generally popular. Paul Lucas, the traveller, testifies that he entertained with

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

magnificence. He was affable, *bon garçon*, a man of the world, shrewd in affairs social, political and economic, and stands out in the picture, a military man of parts, more refined and better polished than his heavier brother, the Paris financier. His long sojourn in the East had, as may be imagined, imparted a large dash of Orientalism to his morals and manners, and "mon Aga," as Aïssé afterwards styled him, while a French gentleman at bottom was also very much of the Grand Turk.

Now, as he walked through the slave-market, he saw among a batch of slaves exposed for sale, and the most important figure in the group, a baby-girl of less than four years old. She was so lovely that he stopped to examine her and gave her a light caress. Then, when the child gazed up at him out of her great dark eyes and spontaneously returned his endearment, she unconsciously made the signal for Destiny to play auctioneer; and thus Aïssé was handed over to Charles, Comte de Ferriol, at the price of fifteen hundred l'vres.

Fifteen hundred livres! A goodly sum it was considered then for right to possession of a woman, body and soul.

In any case, such was the fate which the gods had willed for Aïssé. Had not de Ferriol bought her, she would inevitably—as later, in her budding womanhood, he pointed out to her—have entered the harem of a Turkish master.

Yet a question arises whether the alternative would have been better or worse for poor Aïssé. As things were, her comparatively short life was a very unhappy one. She herself writes, towards its close, that she dares not be alone with her thoughts because they make her too wretched. Had her Aga left her to the Turks, she would probably have been spared the torments of a passion against which her conscience rebelled and, knowing no other lot, might have reconciled herself to

The Slave-Market

the luxurious restrictions of harem-existence. This, in truth, our highly-emancipated Queen of the Blue-stockings—Lady Mary Wortley Montagu—paints in the most glowing colours, declaring that, of all their sex, the harem ladies ought to be happiest since they had no responsibilities, might spend money freely and amuse themselves the livelong day if they pleased. Lady Mary writes rapturously of the cool harem gardens shadowed by trees twined with honey-suckle and jasmine; of pavilions that had wide windows with gilded sashes, marble floors and fountains playing perfumed water; of winter apartments inlaid in mother-of-pearl and ivory, and upholstered in velvet and cloth of gold; of summer sitting-rooms, the walls of which were encrusted with Chinese porcelain, and which had gilded roofs and costly Persian carpets to the tread. To be dressed in garments buttoned with diamonds, and to be hung with chains of pearls and wear a head-dress of emeralds and rubies as large as good-sized eggs—such as Lady Mary describes—to be waited on by a host of beautiful slaves, and to have no care beyond that of pleasing a master from whom, should he grow tired of his fancy, nothing worse was to be dreaded than indifference, seems a lot not without its alleviations. One so gentle and sweet as Aïssé might naturally have loved her lord and secured his enduring affection in return. Lady Mary tells a story of a Spanish lady who, having been in the first instance forced into a harem, chose deliberately, when offered her freedom, to remain there, having fallen in love with her Turkish husband, who remained faithful to her to the end of his days.

“Upon the whole,” writes our lively ambassadress, “I consider the Turkish women as the only free people in the Empire. The very Divan pays a respect to them, and the Grand Seigneur himself, when a pasha is executed, never violates the privileges of the harem. . . . They are queens over their slaves whom the husband

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïsse

has no permission so much as to look upon, except it be an old woman or two that his lady chooses. 'Tis true," adds Lady Mary, "their law permits them four wives, but there is no instance of a man of quality that makes use of this liberty or of a woman of rank that would suffer it. When a husband happens to be inconstant (as these things will happen) he keeps his mistress in a house apart and visits her as privately as he can, just as it is with you."

And Lady Mary goes on: "Among all the great men here I only know the *tefterdar* (treasurer) that keeps a number of she-slaves for his own use (that is on his own side of the house, for a slave once given to serve a lady is entirely at her disposal), and he is spoken of as a libertine, and his wife won't see him though she continues to live in his house."

So, feminine human nature, Christian and Mohammedan, seems pretty much the same in insisting on its own rights; and, taking matters all round, there is just the doubt whether Mohammedan infidels might not have done as well by little Aïssé as the Christian infidels amongst whom her lines were cast.

For shortly after he had bought this baby slave, Comte de Ferriol took her with him when he went on a visit to his brother in Paris and left her there in his sister-in-law's charge to receive a Western education.

CHAPTER II

THE PURCHASER

THAT was how it came about that in the very beginning of the eighteenth century, when Louis the Sun-King was mumbling prayers on his descent to the grave, and the future Regent, Philippe d'Orléans, held youthful revel in the Palais Royal, a little Eastern girl was being reared in the nursery of a tall house in the fashionable quarter of Paris with the two sons of Président Comte Augustin de Ferriol and Madame de Ferriol—*née* de Tencin—his wife.

She was so exquisitely pretty, that little girl, and had so sweet a disposition and manners so engaging that directly she entered the Hôtel de Ferriol she won every heart.

Even the small haughty Antoine, Comte de Pont de Veyle, the two-year-old eldest son of Monsieur le Président and Madame, was pleased to approve of her. Charles, Comte d'Argental, the younger boy, was not born when Aïssé arrived, but later on that aristocratic little *gamin* loved her with yet greater fervour than did his brother, Pont de Veyle.

They called her Aïssé, but no one knew her real name. The slave-dealer from whom Ambassador de Ferriol had bought her styled the child Princess Haidée, but the French children, in their slurring speech, soon softened the harsher Haidée into Aïssé. It is true that her guardians made a little Christian of her when she came to Paris, and she was baptized "Charlotte Elizabeth" according to the Roman Catholic rite. In the register of her death and burial at her parish church of St Roch

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

—signed by her adopted brothers, Pont de Veyle and d'Argental—her Christian designation of Charlotte Elizabeth is recorded, but in all her life she was called only Aïssé.

Only Aïssé!

The romantic mystery of her birth appealed to Madame de Ferriol and the Fantastics of that half-high society into which she was brought. Madame de Ferriol would recount to her friends how the slave-dealer in Constantinople had told a tale of having obtained the child from a band of robber-soldiers, who had carried her off with certain attendants from the palace gardens of a Circassian prince. The prince had been slain, the palace sacked and burned, the inhabitants killed or sold into slavery. But the child playing all unconscious in the palace gardens, surrounded by attendants, had been worth the saving, and they had carried her away.

That was all the slave-dealer could tell. The attendants spoke a strange language and were dazed with terror and grief. It was enough that the child was lovely and that she had the bearing of a tiny princess. As Princess Haidée she would fetch a better price. Therefore Princess Haidée was she called until the French children changed her name to Aïssé.

Aïssé's own baby memories were veiled in mist. But her biographers vaguely suggest that she remembered as in a dream that palace of her infancy. One sees a dim picture of cool courts, great rooms, of figures in robes of state-ceremonial and troops of slaves. She remembered too in confused fashion the gardens wherein she had played—palms, marble fountains and rose bowers. On that, one may figure a medley of terror—shrieks, flames, armed ruffians with naked swords. . . . And then, the being borne away from the garden . . . hurry, clash, clang and darkness through which shone the faces of the robber-soldiers, dreadful, but softening into kindness as the babe's pretty ways attracted them

The Purchaser

and stirred their rough tenderness. For all her life through, Aïssé's lovely face and graceful gestures were her passport to men's hearts. But ever at the back—even in those infantile impressions—a sense of dread and foreboding. And always strange men, who were fierce at first and then laughed and petted her and gave her toys to make her stop crying and cease from questioning.

She wept because everyone for whom she asked—father, mother, guardians—were gone, she was told, and that she would never see them more. There were only the old brown under-nurse and a few slave-girls with whom she had played, and these wailed so fiercely that they frightened her the more. Or else they gave her cakes and sweetmeats; or the soldiers distracted her thoughts by showing her something that amused her for the moment. She was such a babe that she did not know how to persist in questioning; and besides, children soon forget.

Aïssé had no idea how long she was with the soldiers, or when or where these dream-like scenes gave place to another scene far more real and vivid—yet one that she more quickly forgot. Perhaps that was because just then, during the scene in the slave-market, she first looked into the face of Charles de Ferriol, the man who for many years she worshipped as her saviour, almost as her God.

He, her Aga, her Deliverer, was to the child a pivot upon which everything in her world turned. A king-like being, in a dress different from that worn by the other persons in her misty visions of the past. In connection with him she had a confused picture of shining clothes, of curiously-fashioned garments of silk, of flowing locks and of a manly face—fairer than the rest—and of kindly gleaming eyes. In her early years that was how she described him to herself. Beyond that impression she had none more distinct. She had been so young when he had brought her to Paris and

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

left her with her future guardians. Strangely enough she was not impressed in any definite manner by her first experience in the de Ferriol household. She could only remember the flashing yet blurred figure of her Aga filling the canvas. Behind it, the vivid, fantastic scene in the slave-market with its accompanying sense of expectancy and dread—and of this, in later years, the remembrance faded altogether. Yet the noise, the glare, the babel of tongues, the crowd of men in red and green head-gear were convincing and might have made a clearer mark on her mind had they not been eclipsed by that other, fairer vision of her deliverer. These faces, sleek, rapacious, with a different kind of rapacity from that of the robber-soldiers, showed an expression when they looked at her from which, infant as she was, she instinctively shrank. Though she did not recollect it, she had shuddered at the intrusive hands which fingered her flesh. Even at that age the incipient woman-pride in her had rebelled against the appraisal of her person, though she had not understood in the least why she had rebelled nor what that appraisal meant—the examination of her rosy limbs, the measuring of her hair, the inspection of her eyelashes, her teeth. Most of us know the extraordinary clearness with which some incident of early childhood, apparently unrelated to other events, will stand out in the memory with inexplicable clearness—how difficult also it becomes for the growing intelligence to determine whether such experience be not in truth part of a dream. For to the imaginative child the two worlds of illusion and actuality are very closely intermingled, and often, as Aïssé grew older, she herself believed that such memories as she had were those of a dream. Nevertheless, for a while, until she grew out of childhood, the dream seemed very real.

At the time, babe though she was, she had a distinct and pleasing sense of the mimic state with which the

The Purchaser

slave-dealer had surrounded his little prize with the object of enhancing her value—the canopy over her head, the attendants becomingly grouped on either side of her, the new rich dress in which she was clad, the embroidered cushions on which she reclined, the cloying sweetmeats with which they fed her when she got tired and pettish.

• Blur and darkness again! She had become so mortally weary that she fell asleep. Thus the Ambassador saw her, under her canopy, fanned by her brown attendants. He was arrested by the picture: the exquisite little face, ordinarily pale ivory—Aïssé's characteristic colouring all her life—now flushed to the hue of a rose of Sharon, the long lashes and almond-shaped eyelids, the dark hair, full of golden lights; the wee, pink-tipped hand curled like a sea-shell against the cheek. Immensely attracted, the Ambassador stooped to speak to those in charge of the child.

At that, the slave-dealer, scenting a profitable bargain, hurried up, voluble and eager, for, so far, the prices offered for Princess Haidée had not nearly reached the reserve put upon her.

De Ferriol was minded to shut the man's mouth, for his chatter had awakened the sleeping babe and spoiled the tableau. Something, however, caused him to wait and listen to the story poured forth concerning the small slave's high lineage and the romantic circumstances of her capture. Then when the child smiled and put out her little hands to meet his, that middle-aged bachelor-diplomatist, dilettante in art and connoisseur in female beauty, whose desires in such regard had hitherto been confined to the ripe curves of a full-grown woman's lips, realised suddenly that he wanted to possess this pretty babe. Some latent instinct of fatherhood, perhaps, was roused as the tiny girl's rosy fingers closed round his own and prompted him to what may have been at the

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

moment, whatever it became later, one of the best-intentioned actions of his life.

And here it may be told that after the Ambassador had given his little slave into the charge of his sister-in-law—paying that lady handsomely in more ways than one for her maternal surveillance—there was held, before his return to the East, a family conclave in which the Ambassador declared his wish that Aïssé should not be informed of her origin or of the circumstances under which she had become part of the de Ferriol household. She was instructed to call Madame de Ferriol "*maman*," and orders were issued to nurses and governesses that they should parry any inquiries she might make as to the real state of the case. It is easy enough to check a very young child's curiosity and to turn an infant's vague memories of things that have happened, along some suggested line of explanation. So Aïssé's dream-like impressions were referred by her *maman* and governesses to some mysterious disaster that had befallen her and which she was told it was best to forget. When the child began to read and understand children's fairy stories she got the idea that she had been taken prisoner by pirates—pirates figured largely in romances of the period—and kept in durance in some ogre's palace, whence she had been rescued by her "Aga," and for this reason owed him an ever-abiding debt of gratitude.

No need to impress that sentiment upon Aïssé. As she grew out of babyhood, while still her dreams seemed to her realities, the child wove wondrous fancies round the dim presentment of her Aga which her memory cherished; and Aïssé idealised Comte Charles de Ferriol as surely, no man or woman on all this earth had ever before idealised that very imperfect hero.

Not improbably the Ambassador had an ulterior motive for keeping the girl in ignorance of her true relation to him. With all his brusque militarism there

The Purchaser

was a good deal of subtlety about the Ambassador—particularly where women were concerned. He probably realised that the revelation of his having bought her in the slave-market, if made to Aïssé at the psychological moment, would be an argument in favour of his vaguely-formed plans for the child's future destiny.

As for Madame de Ferriol's participation in her brother-in-law's designs—apart from substantial benefits received—she had good reason for compliance with the Ambassador's wishes. She could look ahead, and naturally foresaw that as her sons grew older it would be well to keep their intercourse with a young girl so lovely and so ineligible as a *parti* upon a strictly fraternal footing. All said and done, Aïssé was only a Circassian slave, bought at considerable cost by the Ambassador. For what purpose Madame de Ferriol might well have asked herself; and being essentially a woman of her world might have guessed at some project—as yet nebulous, no doubt—in her brother-in-law's mind further reaching than the paternal impulse that had apparently actuated him. Madame de Ferriol was a sage and ambitious mother—specially so in respect of her idolised eldest boy; and the Bautru-Nogent episode later on, gives clear evidence of the disfavour with which such sort of an alliance would have been regarded by the old *noblesse*. And if Président Augustin de Ferriol was more of the financier than the aristocrat, his wife, born of the poor, proud de Tencins, had inherited all the traditions of her order.

So it was that Aïssé never knew the truth until many years afterwards, when the Ambassador himself told it to her.

Thus on the near side of that little understood but unforgettable experience in the slave-market, the mists closed again over Aïssé, and she could never tell when first her child-consciousness awakened to people and

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

events in the new phase of existence opening before her. After the romantic vision of her deliverer, the lofty, self-contained little personality of her boy-playmate, Pont de Veyle, with his scornful, high-bred face and excellent manners, limned itself most definitely upon the cloudy background of those early times in Paris.

Even at the primitive age of two or three, Pont de Veyle—the future solace of brilliant Madame du Deffand's declining years—had clearly-formed opinions as to what he owed to Society, and, more especially, what Society owed to him. He had been disposed to look haughtily upon the small intruder into his nursery kingdom, but the beauty of little Aïssé and her sweet deference to himself commanded his gallant consideration in return. So the two were always friends though never exactly twin spirits. It was his younger brother, d'Argental, whom from first to last Aïssé took most closely into her heart.

The next incident which made a deep mark upon her childhood, and which happened about eighteen months after her installation in the de Ferriol household, was the being taken into Madame de Ferriol's bedchamber to see Baby d'Argental when he was not many hours old. Pont de Veyle—his mother's pride and joy—had been sent for to be introduced to the newcomer, and Aïssé was permitted to accompany him. She could remember tip-toeing into the darkened, sumptuous room after Pont de Veyle and his nurse, and seeing Madame de Ferriol, thin, black-eyed and pale, outlined against the hangings of the alcove, as she called in a weak voice to her first-born and pointed proudly to the lace-trimmed cradle in which her new infant lay.

The midwife lifted it up towards Pont de Veyle.

"See, sir, how the good God has provided for you this little brother."

Pont de Veyle, precocious and always critical, bent his dark, long-shaped face, so like his mother's, over the

The Purchaser

cradle and examined the infant before giving a characteristic reply.

"I see that the good God did not think well to finish making my brother before He sent him to me."

"Why, my darling, what do you mean?" asked Madame from her bed.

"My brother has no teeth and no eyebrows nor eyelashes. He is not well made as I am," returned the boy.

Madame, a little hurt, nevertheless delighted with the child's cleverness, exclaimed, calling him to her:

"But listen then, my treasure; naturally your brother is not as well made as you are. He is but a baby, and babies are always like that."

But if Pont de Veyle was critical, Aïssé was enchanted. She went close to the baby in the midwife's arms and worshipped it with graceful gestures and Oriental adulation.

"But he is a flower! a jewel! One should praise the good God for what He has sent," she cried.

The old nurse was pleased and let her touch the child. Aïssé begged that she might hold him; the old nurse shook her head.

"I am afraid that Mademoiselle might let him fall."

Aïssé protested. She would be so careful; she would promise that no harm should come to the little jewel if they would only let her have it in her arms.

The two nurses looked at each other. Pont de Veyle's nurse interposed.

"Mademoiselle may be trusted. If Mademoiselle promises to be careful, she will keep her word."

So they permitted Aïssé to take the infant, and she sat down with it on a stool and crooned over it in so maternal a fashion that the midwife said:

"She will make a good mother herself. She is at heart a true woman."

"It would be better for her if she were more of a

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

child," said Pont de Veyle's nurse sagely. "But see, she may be trusted."

And as Aïssé sat and nursed the infant, happy and adoring, the first seed of maternity was sown in her heart—that seed which afterwards bore for her such bitter fruit.

CHAPTER III

THE HÔTEL DE FERRIOL

It was a narrow street, the Rue Neuve St Augustin, compared with present-day Paris and London streets, but for the period it was rather a fine street, with a foot pavement and gutters and low grotesque-looking lamp-posts which held rude oil-lamps. The houses were high—four or five storeys—and of mixed architecture. They were mostly of grey stone, with here and there a red-tiled one wedged in. Some were flat-fronted; some had projecting, box-shaped windows. All the windows showed small panes and most of them opened outwards. A few houses had iron railings in front. The Hôtel de Ferriol was one of the most important. It was narrow-fronted, but went a long way back and had a little garden in the rear. Its windows were square set with stone ornamentation around them. The front door gave on the street. One entered a dark oak-floored hall on which a few Persian rugs were spread, and which was furnished with wooden chairs and stools and an occasional settee. The hall had a very deep recess where a great square window of thick-paned coloured glass gave upon the street. The dining-room, opening from the hall, had another window—a flat one—also looking upon the street. Beyond again through a curtained archway were more reception rooms, mostly used by the men of the family.

Madame de Ferriol's *salon* and her private boudoir were on the first floor, to which, out of the hall, there led a flight of wide, uncarpeted stairs with a broad balustrade.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

These stairs were polished and slippery; so was the balustrade. When the elders were out and the children could escape from the nursery on its upper floor they liked to play on these stairs, only to be picked up ignominiously by flunkies and carried back to their proper guardians. On one of these occasions Aïssé had a bad fall, and to the day of her death bore the mark of that misadventure in the shape of a scar, something like a dimple on the lower part of her chin.

A number of variously-noted people came to Madame's *salon*—ecclesiastics of a tolerant order, brought by her brother, the Abbé de Tencin, *littérateurs*, philosophers, military men and a few State officials, introduced by Madame's admirer, the Minister, Maréchal d'Uxelles. There were financiers, of course, and a small sprinkling of the aristocratic world.

The *salon* was an apartment held in awe by the children and associated by the little Aïssé with ceremonial occasions and with the lady whom she had been taught to call "*maman*."

Madame de Ferriol was slender, fastidious, a well-bred woman, dark-eyed, dark-haired, elegant, of a slightly peevish cast of countenance; a great lady in her way, much admired, if not adored by her complaisant elderly husband.

He was twenty-four years older than his wife—Président de Ferriol—and far less refined in taste and appearance than Madame—a man of medium height, big of girth; hair grizzled, longish, with a limp curl at the end, and tufts of iron grey on cheeks and chin; deep-set eyes looking out from under bushy brows; showy but careless in dress; pre-absorbed in affairs of finance; a bit of a gourmand and unobservant of the finer issues of life.

To go back to the house. Behind the *salon* was Madame's boudoir—dark wood, which she preferred, and orange hangings, which she fancied threw up her

The Hôtel de Ferriol

brunette colouring. Above again, the best bedrooms, and higher still the nurseries, which occupied a whole floor, the flat windows of which looked straight into the nursery windows of the great mansion of the Duc de Gesvres opposite, and down upon the private apartments of the little Duc—eight years Aïssé's senior—her first boy-lover. But of this early affair of her heart, more, as the romancists say, anon.

Next the Hôtel de Ferriol was another great house—that of the Maréchal d'Uxelles. A most important personage the Maréchal—not very young, not very estimable; a great soldier, a pillar of the State—was he not in later years Plenipotentiary in the Peace of Utrecht and one of the Council of the Regency when d'Orléans took the reins? A man to be propitiated, paid court to by the financier-husband and the aspiring wife and already, soon after little d'Argental came into the world, giving subject-matter to the gossips by his open admiration of elegant Madame de Ferriol. Of this, too, more anon.

Then down the street, just turning the corner—a little collection of gables, chimneys, red roofs, pointed ecclesiastical windows—the Convent of the Nouvelles Catholiques, where so many aristocratic little girls of the time received their secular and religious education. These were the chief topographical features of Aïssé's child-life. Beyond lay Paris, to her then almost unknown.

She was a quiet child, a peculiar child, very different in type from the ordinary little French girl, having much of the Eastern calm, something of the Eastern touch of fatality. Each new page of existence that she turned filled her with a slow wonderment, but when once grasped she read it with avidity. A highly-imaginative child, yet never easily aroused to a sense of humour, the little Aïssé lived very much in a world of her own. She showed a curious attitude of aloofness, due perhaps

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

to a certain inborn pride, perhaps to the inherited Oriental sense of "Kismet," noticeable indeed through all her life. In such intercourse with the great as her association with the de Ferriols afforded her, there was an unconscious assumption of equality, which attracted some, but which others—women especially—occasionally resented. This characteristic of hers, as well as a certain tacit admission of the claims of her reputed birth, so far as it was known to the members of the household, secured her respect in the Hôtel de Ferriol.

But with her adopted brothers Aïssé was never aloof or proud.

It was, broadly speaking, a very happy childhood. By the Ambassador's express desire nothing in reason was denied to Aïssé. She was dressed, petted, trained, treated almost as though she were actually a daughter of the house. Almost. Not quite. Yet the difference was so subtle that Madame herself may have been scarcely aware of it. It was true that Président de Ferriol, engrossed in business affairs, did not take much notice of the child, but such attention as he gave Aïssé was kindly meant and was practically as much as his own children received from him. Madame was the ruling spirit of the house so far as domestic matters went, and Madame felt a real fondness for the beautiful little girl. Madame liked pretty things, and above all, Madame desired to be in the mode.

For Orientalism was the vogue just now among great ladies in France. This was a little before the time of Montesquieu's celebrated Persian letters, but Mademoiselle de Scudéry's novels had long since started the rage. Perhaps Madame de Ferriol would have been better pleased had the little Aïssé been a hideous negro boy, such as those ebony monstrosities that are to be seen peering out of the background or squatting in the foreground of certain rose-garlanded, luscious portraits of frail beauties of the Regency. It was quite enough,

The Hôtel de Ferriol

however, that little Pont de Veyle, who was lord of his surroundings—including his parents themselves—condescended to admire her. Pont de Veyle had perfect manners, and his little gallantries to Aissé showed him to advantage at his mother's receptions. It was so gratifying to hear it said: "What a little gentleman the boy is!"—"How charmingly he behaves to his adopted sister!" and so on.

Fashionable women then, as now, made a cult of attractive children, and as Madame de Ferriol had no daughter the little Circassian was a charmingly appropriate figure in the family group. Picture it against the brocaded panels of the white and gold *salon*. Madame all elegance—long pointed bodice, paniers, gauze scarf, chains of beads, loosely-piled coiffure, patches; touch of rouge carrying out the crisp design and colouring, and the artificial posturing of a painted fan. Society then was the Society of the fan. Nobody took anything seriously—except finance. Love and learning, war and statecraft—all were poses; tragic poses sometimes, yet still pose. In the picture, as incongruous as a lily amid a mass of gaudy exotics, slim, grave Aissé in frock of straight falling white satin, brilliant sash brought round under the arm-pits and tied in a big bow behind; brown waving hair with golden lights in it, hanging below the close-fitting cap of fine embroidery and framing the pure oval of the face, delicately pale as the petal of a white rose; large almond-shaped eyes, fringed with sweeping brown lashes, and set wide apart, giving her a wistful, innocent look; short, finely-cut nose; little sensitive mouth with most pathetic curves.

Added to her serenity of demeanour she had unerring tact. Aissé, stationed behind Madame de Ferriol's chair, saw at once and supplemented deficiencies in the little boys. She alone could manage d'Argental, the naughty one. For if Pont de Veyle—tall for his age,

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

long-limbed, with peaked head and arched eyebrows, that slightly suggested scorn—in his miniature ‘knee-breeches and lace-ruffled, long-skirted brocade coat—was the model in small of a young French aristocrat, his brother d’Argental was a scamp, who gave trouble from the time he could run alone. D’Argental objected to being dressed up and made to show off in his mother’s drawing-room. If the nurses succeeded in getting him there, he would stand staring rudely with his thumb in his mouth, or he would make a scene and have to be carried out in disgrace. Yet, as he grew up, d’Argental showed more honest stuff than his eldest brother, who invariably received parental commands with the utmost courtesy; yet there, unless they pleased his little lordship, the matter of obedience ended. The younger boy would storm and beat his nurses, and sometimes flout his parents in their own presence, but he had frequent fits of repentance, and often took greater pains to follow their wishes in their absence than he would show to please them to their faces.

Aïssé led d’Argental with the silver thread of affection, and when he railed at his nurses and turned upon his valets and tutors, Aïssé played peace-maker. At ten years old, d’Argental thrashed with a horse-whip a footman who had offended him; yet afterwards, when Aïssé had impressed upon him the wrong that he had done, he went straight to the flunkey and apologised like the little gentleman that he really was. But Pont de Veyle sneered.

Only Aïssé could control d’Argental, and from that day when the old nurse put the new-born babe into her arms the girl regarded her young adopted brother in the light of a gift made by the good God to herself. In truth, that was one of Aïssé’s comforting reflections when she could not reconcile the attributes of the good God with Monsieur the Abbé de Tencin’s representation of them in his own person. She would tell herself that

The Hôtel de Ferriol

God ~~must~~ be good, notwithstanding appearances and Monsieur l'Abbé, for had not *le bon Dieu* sent her d'Argental?

Aïssé had a rooted dislike to looking at the Abbé's face, and was sometimes reprimanded for averting her eyes when he spoke to her. Oddly enough, when thus rebuked, it would be the Abbé himself who found for her the excuse of shyness, and gradually Aïssé learned that the exalted Churchman, who could be adamant to certain transgressors, would exhibit a benevolent leniency to the misdemeanours of a young and pretty girl. Aïssé always took things seriously. In those days she puzzled her little head a good deal over matters theological, and wondered why so much ceremonial should attend the visits of the Abbé to his sister, and why it should be considered such an honour to be noticed by him.

Except as regards the Abbé little Aïssé had small experience of matters of ceremony. The Président and Madame de Ferriol were not in the Court circle which surrounded the old king and the devout Madame de Maintenon. Though the de Tencins were highly born, the financier de Ferriol's position as president of the Chamber of Metz did not entitle him to royal consideration, and it was almost only by favour of Madame's admirer, the Maréchal d'Uxelles, that they were invited to Court functions. As time went on Aïssé grew accustomed to the Maréchal's unexpected appearances at odd hours in the Hôtel de Ferriol; and coincidentally with the growth of that friendship—which in fact lasted until the close of his life—Madame de Ferriol became more absorbed in interests apart from her home, and the children were less and less in her society. But Aïssé never had the intense shrinking from that foppish but shrewd man of State affairs, the Maréchal, which she felt for the suave, commanding Monsieur l'Abbé. It was one of Aïssé's terrors, when she began to outgrow

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïsse

the elementary religious instruction which was given her in the nursery with her adopted brothers, that she would have to make her first confession to the Abbé.

Her fear was without foundation. The honour of confessing to Monsieur l'Abbé de Tencin was not for an insignificant child. She was taken to make her first confession to a neighbouring priest—a humble person, Father François—simple in faith, not troubling himself over the celebrated Bull *Unigenitus* and the quarrels of the Jansenites and Molinists which agitated the higher ecclesiastical functionaries, nor seeing in Aïssé's promise of beauty a possible instrument for self-aggrandisement—one which by-and-by the Abbé de Tencin tried in vain to manipulate for his own purposes.

Possibly in the little baptised Christian, Charlotte Elizabeth, there still remained a spice of the heathen Princess Haidée. Anyhow, from the very beginning, the child conceived a deep distrust of Monsieur l'Abbé. Upon the occasions of the Abbé's visits to his sister the boys would be brought down to see their uncle, and Aïssé with them would be required to kneel for the Abbé's blessing. It was Pont de Veyle's nature to conduct himself with due propriety, and the boy was very soon shrewd enough to realise that it was well to have for a relative an Abbé who was a friend of the powerful Dubois. D'Argental, on the other hand, was far too much of a scapegrace ever to be popular with the ecclesiastical side of the house, and never at any time troubled himself about political matters. But Aïssé, as she knelt down in her straight little white frock, shrank intuitively from the touch of the Abbé's hands upon her head, even as, an unconscious babe, she had shrunk from the fingers of those sleek Turks in the slave-market in Constantinople. The stern *gouvernante* provided by Madame de Ferriol, seeing her charge's repugnance, took her to task, bidding her

The Hôtel de Ferriol

remember that Monsieur l'Abbé was the representative of the Most High and that wherever he went the good God always stood behind him. At which Aïssé, who took most statements literally—having brought over from her Eastern babyhood the idea of awesome supernatural powers being sometimes vested in human individuals—would peer furtively behind the Abbé when he entered the room, in search of such a manifestation of the Deity. She found it not, but tried to believe the thing might be, though in her child mind she marvelled greatly that the good God—if He were a discernor of persons—should choose as His representative on earth Monsieur l'Abbé de Tencin.

A striking figure of the times, nevertheless, the Abbé de Tencin. He was then a man in early middle life of a somewhat austere mould of feature; the austerity belied, however, by the full lips, the flabby droop of the nostrils, and the sensuous chin. His admirers attributed these characteristics of his face to a large and tolerant humanity, and the appearance of immense firmness he was able to put on suggested that his lofty intellect maintained complete control over any weaknesses of the flesh. But his detractors saw in that firmness an indication of cruelty, and this Aïsse, impressionable and intuitive, sensed and feared the Abbé accordingly.

To confess to Father François was not such a terrible business. The recital of her infantile peccadilloes involved no particularly severe penances, and in due time the tiny maid became *dévoté*. She had received her first Communion. She confessed regularly to Father François in the Chapel of the Convent close by. One day she kneeled there in her white dress with the veil, to which she had been promoted after her Communion, hiding a troubled face. The little sins were duly brought out and murmured into the director's ear. But there remained yet one sin—a great sin—

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

which Aïssé's shamed lips could scarcely bring themselves to utter.

It was to her verily "*le gros péché*."

Poor innocent little child, how could she know what "*le gros péché*" meant? She only knew after severe heart-searchings that she must gain absolution for that, which she believed it to be.

Long years afterwards she yearned to confess the true "*gros péché*" as she conceived it; whether or not it would have been regarded as the sin of sins at the Heavenly Tribunal is another matter. In those after days, when she could not die until she had confessed her crime of love, it was only through the kind offices of those two graceless sinners, Mesdames de Parabère and du Deffand, that the grace of confession was obtained by the dying penitent. Strange foreshadowing, this childish avowal, of that death-bed confession! Now, at eight years old, when the priest bade her tell him what "*le gros péché*" might be, Aïssé faltered forth her tragic story:

"Mon père—it is—that I love—a man."

"How old is he?" asked the astonished confessor.

"He has eleven years," returned the innocent Aïssé.

"And does he love you in return?" asked the Father.

"But no, we have never spoken of love," said Aïssé.

"How do you love him?" pursued the puzzled priest.

"I love him as myself," replied the child.

"Do you love him as well as you love God?" asked Father François.

As well as she loved God! Aïssé was horrified at the suggestion. How was it possible that the Father could think she loved a young man as well as she loved the good God!

The Hôtel de Ferriol

Father François laughed. The heavy sentence Aissé had feared was not pronounced. The father told her he would not impose any penance for a sin like that. She must continue to be wise and she must never allow herself to be alone with a man. That was all he had to say to her for the present.

Aissé has told in a letter to Madame Calandrini the story of her childish amours with the Duc de Gesvres and of her confession of "*le gros péché*."

The three boys in the great Hôtel de Gesvres opposite and the de Ferriol children exchanged visits, they played in the gardens of each other's houses and met on their walks with their respective tutors and governesses.

They made signals to and from their nursery windows. The little Duc—eldest of them all—at ten, was precocious, romantic. He had a melancholy air. He would stand in the balcony of his own apartment wrapped in poetic reverie. He was handsome; he wore rich and elaborate clothes—affecting peculiarities of cut and colour. Even then, he was given to little effeminacies, played the æsthete and the embryo fantastic. From the upper window Aissé would watch the Duc. She was often surprised in this pleasing occupation. The nurses teased her. It was not proper for a well-brought-up young lady to gaze thus at a young man. Did Mademoiselle imagine that for her was reserved such a *parti* as the Duc de Gesvres?

Thus while the Duc's little brothers played games with Pont de Veyle and d'Argental, the Duc, like Aissé, took life seriously. When the others ran about they two sat apart and discoursed—as they flattered themselves—like reasonable mortals. Aissé was lovely enough to delight the future fantastic. Even children in those days must needs act the gallant. Nurses and tutors joked the more. Madame and d'Uxelles tickled themselves over the flirtation. Aissé's Aga was told

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

the story, and he on his side wrote in serio-comic terms of the romance. But wrote also that he was returning shortly to Paris. Meanwhile, the little Duc—perhaps it was on Father François's suggestion—had been sent with his tutor to the country. There was no further need for remorse in Aïssé's guileless soul.

Father François—who would not for the world have betrayed Aïssé's confession—took the opportunity however to represent to Madame de Ferriol that the child's mind might be well employed over lesson-books at the convent. Let her be sent to the nun's classes, she appeared old enough for more advanced education. To that Madame replied that as the Ambassador had retained the right of decision in all matters concerning Aïssé, the question must be referred to him.

Which was done. With the result that Charles de Ferriol desired that Aïssé's affairs should stand over until his arrival.

So the child was told that soon she would see her Aga, her deliverer—the Potentate in her kingdom of dreams! And he came—a fairy-king indeed—a grand and courtly gentleman, trailing the magnificence of the East, but exhibiting all the polish of the West—in curled wig, silken hose, embroidered vest, brocaded satin, lace, gold-handled sword—everything complete. Lavish too! Laden with gifts—an amber necklace for Aïssé; fichus from Smyrna, the famous Balm of Mecca, and what not for his sister-in-law, whom he treated with an affectionate gallantry that was as charming as it was distinguished.

The child-worship, revived, leaped into fervid flame. Romantic Aïssé built a new altar to her deliverer. She adored him for his gracious presence, his noble manners, his tenderness to herself. On his side, equally, the Ambassador was more than satisfied with his purchase. He saw an exquisite white rosebud forming for the delectable bloom, a rare pearl of the

The Hôtel de Ferriol

Orient, a precious stone of so fine a water that it would be a crime to spare pains in its cutting. Here would be a gem beside which all the jewels flaunted at Marly and St Cloud must seem of indifferent lustre.

He made no secret of his satisfaction, and the child, joying in his content, was as a flower opening its petals to the sun.

• It was her Aga's pleasure to have her in his company as much as the outside claims of Society permitted. For naturally the rich and agreeable diplomatist was well *jêted* during his Paris holiday. Life went gaily then at the Hôtel de Ferriol. Madame's *salon* glittered with stars and orders. Her evening receptions were thronged. On these occasions Aissé, in her white satin frock and broad sash, always appeared clinging to her Aga's hand.

She was used to being fondled and caressed by her guardian. But on one memorable occasion—that of a great reception at the Hôtel de Ferriol the evening before the Ambassador's departure for Constantinople—there happened in this connection something which Aissé never forgot. All the children were present, and Aissé, looking older than her eleven years, attracted so much attention that when the time came for the boys to go to bed, Madame, finding it difficult in the girl's presence to parry questions concerning her origin, desired her to retire also.

The three made their obeisances to the heads of the house, kneeling as was their custom to kiss the hands of M. le Président and of Madame. Then Aissé sought her Aga, who was the centre of a group of gay Parisians, and interrupted the highly-flavoured conversation by holding out her arms to the Ambassador and lifting her exquisite mouth for a kiss. At which came ripples of laughter from the fops and the fashionable ladies and a burst of badinage not untinged with ribaldry. The Ambassador was accused of over-tenderness to this budding Eastern blossom and was asked loudly whether

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

in the future he meant to keep its sweetness for himself alone. De Ferriol frowned and drew back from the child's proffered endearment. To Aïssé's pained surprise he pushed her from him, then, seeing the startled look in her face, he bent in the most courtly manner imaginable and kissed her little hand as if he had been offering homage to a princess.

But the child's wound was not assuaged. Her sensitive nature shrank at the rebuff, and she suffered as she had suffered long ago when her governess rebuked her for watching the little Duc de Gesvres. She felt that she had committed some unpardonable sin and was retiring with crimson cheeks and shamed eyes.

The Ambassador kept her hand in his, however, and when she curtsied very low to him and his friends, he, with a word of apology and a sweep of his arm, made way for her out of the circle. Still with marked deference he led her to the door of the *salon* and gave her into the charge of a *valet-de-chambre* standing outside the *portière*. Before taking leave of her, he bent again and whispered in her ear, "Aïssé must remember that she is now too old to embrace gentlemen in public."

How the child took the admonition to heart might be seen by her conduct next day.

The Ambassador was about to start upon his journey back to Constantinople. The elders of the family and the head servants were already assembled in the hall to bid him God-speed when the three children were brought down for the leave-taking. Aïssé, pale and shrinking, was as distant and dignified as her guardian could possibly have desired. She curtsied very low, with eyes downbent, as she advanced between her two adopted brothers. Yet it was curious to note how, all unconsciously, she became the central figure in the scene. The boys bore themselves like supporters to a princess. Pont de Veyle, considerably taller than the girl, was knightly, dandyish, impressed with the im-

The Hôtel de Ferriol

portance of his uncle, whom they had been taught to look upon as a family benefactor. D'Argental, shorter, but more robustly built, showed a rougher manner that was full of frank charm.

Aissé extended her hand when she curtsied. It was as if she expected the Ambassador to kiss it as he had done upon the previous evening. But now he drew her to him, passing his hand over her hair with lingering touch; and thus holding her to him, he looked from her to one boy after the other.

"Aissé's brothers will take care of their little sister—will they not?" he asked.

Pont de Veyle made a courtly asseveration that meant everything—or nothing; d'Argental clenched his boyish fists, advanced a step, and replied stoutly:

"I will protect Aissé with my life."

The Ambassador smiled and nodded, well pleased. He patted d'Argental's shoulder and bade the boy remain always thus, *preux chevalier*. Then he led Aissé by the hand to that deep alcove in the hall, partially curtained, where the square window of coloured glass abutted on the street. It was almost like a little room. A low seat ran round three sides of it, and the coloured glass of the window being very thick, the recess was so dark that a hanging lamp from Turkey, also of coloured glass, which the Ambassador had brought, was lighted, shedding a faint rosy illumination.

The Ambassador placed himself on the window-seat and held the child within his arms, under the light of the lamp.

He looked at her for a long time studying the sweet oval face, the dark Oriental eyes drooping a little under the shadow of their sweeping lashes, as, childlike, she scrutinised the magnificence of his embroidered waistcoat, the fineness of his ruffled shirt.

"Thou wilt not forget me, Aissé, before I come to thee again?" he said.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aissé

"That would be impossible," she answered softly.

"Yet I think, my dear, it may be long before thou lookest upon my face again. Wilt thou remember and owe one whom thou canst not see?"

The child lifted her luminous eyes and gazed at him adoringly, answering with all her heart, but with a quaint literalness and a religious ardour for which he was not prepared:

"I cannot see God. Nevertheless I love *le bon Dieu* and think of Him always."

Charles de Ferriol smiled—a wistful smile, slow and very tender.

"Nay, I may not lay claim to power divine. I am no god, Aissé. I am but mortal. Yet verily when I look at thee it is but mortal I desire to be. But I would have thee remember, Aissé, that the time may come when I shall ask from thee the best thou hast to give."

The child's innocent eyes met his wonderingly.

"Thou art my Aga," she said simply. "Command all that Aissé has to give."

His eyes kindled and seemed to grow larger while they rested on her face,

"Thou shalt ratify that promise when the time comes for me to remind thee of it," he said. And with a sudden movement he made as though to gather her to his breast. But Aissé eluded him with fascinating grace yet clearly-determined evasion.

"Monsieur l'Ambassadeur said but last night that Aissé was too old to be embraced."

He laughed delightedly.

"Thou little sorceress! I said 'in public,' Aissé mine. But now we part and we are alone. There is none to see. Give me thy lips, sweet blossom, lest I snatch the nectar that I need."

And before she could again refuse his arms closed round her and he kissed her fervently.

In after years Aissé never forgot that kiss.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROSES OF ABLON

THE Ambassador had laid strict injunctions upon his sister-in-law in regard to Aïssé's rearing—Madame la Présidente being absolute ruler of the Hôtel de Ferriol and its dependencies of Ablon and the family château, under, it must be confessed, the suzerainty of his young Majesty, Antoine de Pont de Veyle.

Monsieur le Comte de Ferriol desired that his ward should receive every possible advantage, physical and mental, in her training. Her beauty was to be nurtured with sedulous care, and her mind was to be educated in all the learning and accomplishments befitting a noble young lady of France: and as the Comte de Ferriol paid well it was worth Madame's while to give attention to his commands.

Accordingly little Aïssé was brought up just like Madame's own daughter, which she believed herself to be; and every morning, hooded, cloaked and suitably attended, was conveyed the few yards round the corner to the convent in the Rue St Anne, where she duly learned her lessons with other girls of quality, and was then conveyed home again. She did her best to store her little brain, for she was told that her Aga wished her to excel. It must be owned though—and in truth her own letters bear witness—that Aïssé never became intellectually distinguished. Beautiful, charming, graceful, pure and sweet—she was all these, but never a wit like her friend Madame du Deffand or a blue-stocking like Voltaire's Madame du Chatelet.

She got to know well the flat walls and barred

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

pointed windows, and the deep-set door with its rusty iron bell-pull which admitted her into the convent. Likewise the close, over-crowded class-rooms—so cold in winter, so stuffy in summer. And as she grew older she became familiar too with the dormitories and the nuns' quarters. For once when the de Ferriol family migrated from Paris for a more lengthened stay than usual at Château Pont de Veyle it was not found convenient to take governesses for Aïssé as well as tutors for the boys, and so the little girl was left with the nuns as a boarder.

Little Aïssé, somewhat spoiled nowadays, rebelled bitterly against the restraints and discomforts of the convent—against the ugliness of its long dark stone passages; its bare walls and low white-washed over-peopled dormitories; against the confinement, the tiresome rules, the squalid economies, and the equally squalid indulgences, which, small devotee though Aïssé had become, seemed to her to rob the religious life of all its poetry.

She wrote and besought Madame de Ferriol to take her away—besought unavailingly. At last, taking her courage in her hands, she sent a letter to her beloved Aga himself, imploring him to remonstrate with "*maman*" and have her relieved from the irksome discipline she disliked.

Her deliverer did not fail her. The Autocrat at the French Embassy at Pera issued his commands. Madame la Présidente in Paris was forced to obey them.

For much of the affluence reigning at present in the Hôtel de Ferriol was due to Président Augustin's appointment as agent for the transmission of certain large sums from the Royal Exchequer, for the furtherance of His Majesty's, King Louis's, interests in the Orient—an appointment obtained for Augustin de Ferriol doubtless by the combined favours of Maréchal d'Uxelles and of the Ambassador.

The Roses of Ablon

Whether these sums in their entirety duly reached the Orient is another matter. This and more important questions were dealt with later when the new Regency brooms began to sweep the old Auglan stable, and Augustin de Ferriol's name stands to this day in the list of financiers heavily taxed by a Court of Enquiry into the malversation of public monies.

Let it be at once said that no shadow of discredit in that respect ever attached to the name of Charles de Ferriol. Whatever his faults, the Ambassador was at least an honest gentleman.

This, in passing. What at the time concerned Aïssé was that in consequence of her Aga's intervention Madame de Ferriol allowed her in future to accompany her adopted brothers for their long vacation to Château Pont de Veyle, where she was as happy as any child could be, playing in the woods and by the banks of the little Veyle. For their shorter holidays they went to Ablon, Madame's river-retreat on the left bank of the Seine—her "*guinguette*," as my lord Bolingbroke was wont to style it.

It was my lord Bolingbroke and his beloved lady—Marquise Marie-Claire de Marcilly de Villette—who in later years, at a momentous crisis of Aïssé's fate, played brotherly and sisterly part to a hapless and yet happy young woman, and who about this period first came into the young girl's life.

At that time Harry St John, later Viscount Bolingbroke, seemed to Aïssé—with the exception of her Aga—the goodliest, grandest and kindest man she had ever met. At occasional intervals this brilliant creature of heart and genius and political intrigue—this young Alcibiades as he was aptly named—this kingmaker as he might have been had James Stuart known how to grasp opportunity when it came his way—would flash like a meteor on Paris, appearing and disappearing, yet

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aissé

during his brief visits always more or less stationary at the Hôtel de Ferriol.

In the years 1708 to 1710 Bolingbroke was out of office and in so-called retirement in England. But Bolingbroke, that proto-Imperialist, with his strong views regarding the maintenance of outside British possessions, and in his way an ideal minister for war and for foreign affairs, was not likely to remain idle during the Whigs' tenure of office, when all Europe more or less was waiting for the turn of events to be decided at the death of Queen Anne.

There were underground intrigues going on in favour of the Pretender at St Germain, and later at Bar; there were wars and rumours of war and of peace. Maréchal d'Uxelles was envoy from France at the abortive conference of Gertruydenberg—d'Uxelles, Madame de Ferriol's *cher ami*, then and later in intimate relations with England's great Tory minister.

Thus was laid the foundation of Bolingbroke's long friendship with Madame de Ferriol and her family, including the young Aissé, of whom he writes on one occasion to Madame asking her to embrace for him "*la chère Circassienne*."

That was an age of friendships, platonic and other—and pre-eminently Bolingbroke was a "friend." He himself says that he knows no bond so solemn as friendship. He wishes for his life, "two-thirds to friendship, one-third to himself, nothing to the world."

But not always like a meteor did Bolingbroke descend upon the Faubourg St Germain, where, in the Rue St Dominique, Madame la Marquise de Villette had her town residence. Long before his dramatic exit by way of the prepaid opera-box, and his subsequent exile from the English political arena, Bolingbroke had made use of Morgan's ship to bear him secretly across the Channel.

Aissé was entering her teens when Harry St John

The Roses of Ablon

met at the de Ferriols the one woman in the world for him—the one and only woman who retained his worship to the end.

A fascinating, intellectual and altogether delightful being, the Marquise de Villette, not yet, at the beginning of the acquaintance, released by death from her elderly husband, to whom in truth she was sincerely attached, and to whose children she was always an admirable and dearly-loved stepmother. Young for her years—she was a little older than Bolingbroke—hers was the charm which never grows old. In Bolingbroke's own phrase, she possessed a "profusion of the ethereal spirit." Aristocrat to the core in habit and appearance, she had the gracious dignity, the ease and polish of generations of nobility. Her delicate frame gave an impression of being kept alive by its inward fire. Her small head was set upon a long slender throat; her mouth was exquisitely human; her face, not strictly beautiful, delighted by its vivacity and changeful expression. Above all, though she never had children there was in her something essentially maternal which appealed peculiarly to the motherless Aissé—motherless notwithstanding that the child did not yet realise her orphaned condition as a fact.

Perhaps the wit and sparkle of the elder woman—qualities in which Aissé was herself so deficient—had something to do with the little girl's admiration. Perhaps in Aissé's attraction to Madame de Villette there was a foreshadowing of the tie that afterwards bound the two so closely. Certain it is, that even in those days when no vestige of her innocent bloom had been brushed away, Aissé, supposed to be screened so safely under Madame de Ferriol's maternal protection, was inclined to turn from her whom she called "*maman*" to that other woman who in after years gave her the mother's care she failed to obtain from Madame de Ferriol.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aissé

The Marquise would smile tenderly on the child and show her many a little private kindness when they met in Madame de Ferriol's *salon*; and Aissé's great dark eyes would light up with responsive affection whenever her friend, who was twenty years older than herself, entered the room.

So too did the eyes of Harry St John beam at sight of Marie-Claire de Villette, and he grew paternally fond of Aissé, because the child loved the Marquise and because the Marquise was fond of Aissé.

From the first moment St John was immensely affected by this woman. He who had loved so many was securely caught at last. For thirty-five years his devotion to her never faltered. But he had the unsympathetic wife and the great career on the other side of the water—the last, in those days of facile ties, perhaps a bigger barrier than the first—and Madame de Villette had her old husband and her step-children, and moreover she was not a woman who loved easily.

Small wonder that my lord Bolingbroke had a reputation for fierce ephemeral passions and for being run after by the beauties of his own Court. Never was there a more attractive gentleman. A splendid personage he looked to other eyes than those of the little Aissé in his well-curled flowing peruke, his silken clothes and fine Flanders lace. There is a portrait of him made in the year 1714 which shows well the long, fine-featured face, with its firm-cut, faintly humorous yet tenderly human mouth, its strong, sensitive nose, broad high forehead and large expressive eyes. Add to his magnificent vitality the brilliancy of genius, the insight of statecraft and the courtliness of manner, which even in that courtly age he possessed to a remarkable degree. Was it any marvel that Madame de Villette should have succumbed? The marvel was that she did not yield sooner.

For at first she treated his infatuation with an airy

The Rest of Ablon

lightness that drove the Englishman almost to madness. Maybe she was afraid in advance of that one passion in her life, which the astrologer de Boulainvilliers had foretold, adding the further prediction—in due course verified—that she would die in a foreign land.

Perhaps she feared the vehemence of St. John's devotion and deemed it wiser to hold him at a little distance in purely platonic bonds of friendship. At all events, during the earlier stages of their intimacy, the Marquise would keep Aissé by her side when in my lord Bolingbroke's society; and "*la chère Circassienne*" took her first unconscious lessons in love-making when listening to the talk of these undeclared lovers.

But there came a time when the love ~~was declared~~ and indulged.

The Marquis de Villette had died. The Marquise was a widow, free, rich, and willing to be wooed, albeit that the existence of Lady Bolingbroke—~~née~~ Frances Winchescombe—across the Channel at Bucklebury, put marriage with the beloved Marquise out of the reckoning for Harry St. John. In the reckoning, however, were political interests and intrigues, making secrecy and the employment of Morgan's boat as a means of transit and of Madame de Ferriol's *cachette* Ablon as a rendezvous for the lovers a matter of necessity. Here were the Stuart plots to be considered, the state of parties on both sides of the Channel, the humours of the dying Louis, reluctant, until force compelled, to disown his cousin the king in exile at St Germain. There were grim Madame de Maintenon and Jesuits and Jansenists to be counted with; Church affairs watched over too, so far as concerned their ~~own~~ ambitions, by Abbés de Tencin and Dubois, the ~~last~~ then waiting his time. There were the diplomatists on whom the peace of Europe and the Spanish and English succession depended—Walpole, Stanhope, de Totsy, d'Orville, with Madame de Ferriol and the Tencin

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

clique used cautiously by the wary, taciturn Maréchal as pieces in his game, while the love-stricken but alert, patriotic Bolingbroke and the sympathetic Marquise were his pawns.

Now little Aïssé—obscure Circassian slave as she was—comes likewise into the political chess-tourney—a most innocent and unconscious instrument in the hands of d'Uxelles, Madame de Ferriol and the rest. Bolingbroke, reconnoitring political aspects at the same time that he made love to the Marquise, might not, for party reasons, be seen going in and out of the Hôtel de Ferriol and Madame de Villéte's house in the Rue St Dominique. And Madame de Villéte, for all that she was ever single-souled in her fidelity to Bolingbroke, had no mind to outrage the conventionalities. She was related to Madame de Maintenon. Her step-daughter was Abbess of Sens; the influential and news-mongering de Caylus' were her connections. Decorum always fought in her with passion, and the sense of social and family duty was almost the strongest sentiment of her soul.

Meetings in Paris were difficult. A convenient refuge presented itself in Ablon, only a few leagues distant—the "*guinguette*," a low white cottage, absolutely secluded in its own grounds and almost undiscoverable from road to river, so dense were the trees that overshadowed it. Hither St John repaired; there his friends sought him, and there he lay hidden from his enemies, and out of mark of prying eyes and gossiping tongues. The loan of Ablon was one of the strongest links in Bolingbroke's and Madame de Ferriol's friendship. The loan of Aïssé was another benefit never forgotten and afterwards well requited to the girl.

It came about this way. Paris had been unhealthy that season. Fever had broken out in the class-rooms at the convent, and Aïssé had taken it. The boys were sent to Pont de Vaux. Aïssé, isolated in the nursery

The Roses of Ablon

floor of the Hôtel de Ferriol, and outgrowing her strength in her convalescence, had become pale and weedy. The doctor recommended country air, life out of doors, and no books or lessons. He would have chosen for her the more bracing air of the further country—did not altogether approve of Ablon as low-lying and pervaded by river-damp. But Madame la Présidente preferred Ablon, and therefore to Ablon was Aissé taken.

With her the dear Marquise, quietly dressed—much more quietly than Aissé had ever seen her even in her mourning garb—more like a humble *gouvernante* than a great lady of Paris. And in truth she seemed to act by choice the part of *gouvernante*, waiting on the invalid child, playing with her in the garden, making daisy chains on the lawn, and nosegays of buttercups.

The lawns were a feature of Ablon. The turf was hundreds of years old and spread like a cushion of green velvet. The roses were in bloom also, and nightingales sang in the trees. Here Madame la Marquise was as a child herself. There in her simple kinship with Nature—combining as it did so piquantly with the polish of courts and with out-of-the-common intellectual gifts—lay a considerable part of her charm. Had her sympathy not been genuine, Aissé's intuition would quickly have discerned the lack. As it was, her dear Marquise made an adorable playfellow in that lovely old garden, which Madame de Villette enjoyed as much as did Aissé herself.

Then into the garden of Paradise came the Prince—my lord Bolingbroke—all unexpected and so welcome—unexpected at least to Aissé. The child lost then much of the companionship of her grown-up playfellow. Madame la Marquise and Monsieur de Bolingbroke had more important affairs with which to occupy themselves than the weaving of daisy chains and the plucking of roses and buttercups. Besides—two is company, three

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

is none; and, doubtless Marie-Claire de Villette and Harry St John preferred to gather their roses together alone.

Nevertheless, although Aïssé was left a good deal to solitary dreams, Bolingbroke and his Marquise found time for occasional games with her as well. And the child loved her two friends so dearly that it was enough joy for her to see them thus content to be together. Little Aïssé in her unconscious purity saw nothing more strange in the friendship of these two than she saw in the friendship of Madame de Ferriol and the Maréchal d'Uxelles, which had been as much a condition of life at the Hôtel de Ferriol as the presence there of Monsieur le Président, Madame's husband, or of Monsieur l'Abbé de Tencin, Madame's brother.

Indeed, such friendship as that between Madame de Villette and my lord Bolingbroke seemed more natural, seeing that here was all pleasure and harmony, the child loving her two friends, who, as a matter of course, loved her, and still more as a matter of course loved each other. It was all so simple, whereas the child's quick intuition often sensed the fact that all was not simple at the Hôtel de Ferriol—that there were skeletons in the cupboard of Madame's brown and orange boudoir and in the white and gold *salon*. Aïssé sometimes wondered vaguely how her *maman* could make a friend of that great, coarse-looking old fop the Maréchal, so strange and glum and unattractive, and why she wept when he stayed long away from the house and seemed so anxious and preoccupied when he was there.

Innocent Aïssé! At thirteen the lily was still immaculate. Her baby *amours* with the small Duc de Gesvres had not taught her much after all; nor had Father François further enlightened her as to "*le gros péché*." The shock of that knowledge was reserved for later years, to be wrought upon her by ruder hands.

The Roses of Ablon

Well, the rose-season at Ablon did not last very long. Madame la Marquise went back to her two worlds of Paris and of her provincial home, and Lord Bolingbroke returned to England, and in due course to the sweets and cares of office. But on several occasions during that autumn and winter he made furtive stays at the *guinguette*, on which occasions the Marquise, hooded and veiled, came to see her friend, and Aïssé as before unconsciously enacted the part of Dame Propriety, only too delighted to be again in the company of these two charming people whom she loved.

Somehow the affair came to the ears of the Ambassador, and that master of Eastern love-intrigue professed extreme anger at these intrigues in the West and indignantly reproached his sister and the de Tencin clique for having made of Aïssé a cover to such compromising transactions. Like most sensualists, he laid great store upon the purity of his own particular pearl, and had left it as his particular injunction to Madame de Ferriol that the child should be kept simple and ignorant regarding all such matters.

In consequence there fell a coolness between him and my lord Bolingbroke, with whom before he had been very friendly—a coolness that more or less continued even until the marriage of my lord with the Marquise de Villette, which took place the year of the Ambassador's death, a long time later.

And now Aïssé had to make up for lost opportunities in the class-rooms of the convent, for that distant controller of her destiny sent orders that she should, in future be kept closely to her books, and that only under the eye of her "*maman*" should she have ocular demonstration of Parisian society. Madame put such interpretation as seemed to her good upon the limit drawn, and Aïssé's attendance was required in the

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

salon whenever Madame de Ferriol desired to produce a picturesque effect by placing "*la belle Circassienne*" in evidence in the family group.

To this it appears that the Ambassador made no objection, for he writes in pleased terms about the report brought him of the children, and in especial of Aïssé, by a certain Monsieur Bizy visiting Constantinople who had seen her both at Paris and in the country.

It was about this time that Comte Charles de Ferriol sent among other presents for his ward a complete Circassian costume, and it became Madame de Ferriol's whim to array the girl in this and to make of her a sort of show upon occasions of ceremony. Indeed the sensation that Mademoiselle created in this dress was so great that for several years after she was grown up she used often to appear clad *à la Turque* and "*la belle Circassienne*" gave inspiration to various poets and romancists as well as to a few spiteful letter-writers of the time, who have left—so Monsieur Capefigue recounts—a picture of her as the transplanted odalisque, clad in Turkish dress and smoking a *narghileh*, which is not altogether pleasing in colour and is certainly incorrect. For Aïssé appears to have been entirely lacking in the kind of precocity more generally associated with Eastern women than with their Western sisters. This is the more remarkable since in her very early girlhood one suitor—if not others—made an offer for her hand. There is no record that Aïssé herself was aware of any such proposal, but Madame de Ferriol must have referred it to the Ambassador, and it is pleasant to note that he gives evidence of no self-interested motive in regard to his ward. Possibly any personal designs which he may previously have entertained for her future had been temporarily superseded by some immediate and more pressing attraction. At all events he writes about this time to his brother:

The Roses of Ablon

"Haidée has already been asked in marriage. I find her very young. I have however written to my sister-in-law that if the parti be a good one, one must not throw it away."

The *parti* does not appear to have been a good one—it could scarcely have been the young Duc de Gesvres, whose matrimonial affairs made gossip later. Anyway, nothing more seems to have been said about any *prétendant* for Aïssé's hand.

She was not quite fifteen—about the age when in ordinary course she would have made formal entry into Society. But Aïssé was in no hurry to give up her childish occupations, and though she did not love learning for learning's sake she had an innate docility which made her like being taught her lessons and prefer being under control. Hers was a clinging and naturally obedient nature, and she would have found her best joy in dependence upon one of stronger character than herself whom she could respect as well as love.

So far—if one may set apart Madame de Villette—she had not found one such among the frequenters of Madame de Ferriol's *salon*. Her first sense of aloofness from the people around her seemed to have returned, and she lived anew in her own world of dreams, wherein her Aga stood out still as the central figure, but of which religion too made a considerable part. Aïssé worried herself somewhat over theological difficulties and did not find it quite easy to reconcile precept and practice. Father François—her director at the convent—had passed away in the odour of sanctity from a life unruffled by controversy, too humble to be affected by ecclesiastical strife or to be noticed by the great; and yet having left his mark, if only upon the uncertain growth of Aïssé's faith. The girl sincerely mourned her director and missed his simple counsels, being herself at this period in some perplexity as to how far she

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

should deliver her soul to the priest concerning the small complications of her life. On the one hand there was the child's impulse to confess the most trifling wrong; on the other a feeling growing upon her more and more that reticence must be observed in regard to the doings of her friends—such for example as the stolen visits of Lord Bolingbroke to Ablon and the bond between him and Madame de Villette, about which she had been cautioned to keep silence, on the vague warning that the publication of these things might embroil my lord with his own Queen.

It may have been the part that Aïssé had played in that little drama which, on the death of Father François and in the interregnum between that event and the appointment of his successor, caused the Abbé de Tencin to announce his fatherly intention of receiving the girl's confessions.

Poor Aïssé shrank timorously from the suggestion, making excuses for not availing herself of the honour. The Abbé was tolerant of the excuses. But for some little while he had been casting avaricious eyes upon this promising bud, taking care to impress upon every one that it was in the interests of the Church that he studied its development. Aïssé however avoided Monsieur l'Abbé as far as was possible, never having got over her early distaste for that eminent prelate.

If Aïssé disliked Monsieur l'Abbé, she felt a yet greater aversion for Mademoiselle Claudine de Tencin, the *religieuse*, whose acquaintance she made during one of the annual visits to Pont de Veyle, when the fascinating young nun, by interest of her brother and her confessor, got a short exemption from the not too severe discipline of her convent at Grenoble and spent a few weeks at Château Pont de Veyle, which lay at a comparatively small distance to the north.

Mademoiselle Claudine was considerably younger than Madame de Ferriol, and much cleverer than that

The Roses of Ablon

lady or her other sister, the gossiping and ill-natured Madame de Grolée. She was likewise much prettier than either, though Aissé never could admire the nun's thin-featured, oval face, with its long, half-closed eyes, which could flash and sparkle on occasions, nevertheless, and the delicately-cut mouth—a little cruel like that of Monsieur l'Abbé and with the same firm, full under-lip. Claudine made a bitter plaint of having been forced into the nunnery, for which she owned that she had no vocation, and frankly announced that she intended to do everything she could to obtain release from her vows.

But it was not until she had accomplished her release and was living in Paris that Aissé saw very much of Mademoiselle de Tencin—Madame she was called by-and-by, when they made her a Canoness of Neuville, as a preliminary step to almost unrestricted freedom. The dislike was reciprocal. Mademoiselle de Tencin detested the Circassian girl—detested her because Aissé was beautiful, because she considered that too much money was spent on the child, and because Aissé was likely to have opportunities that had been denied to herself. Aissé grew to dread the scornful sidelong glance of those long narrow eyes, which would run contemptuously over the whole of the slight shrinking figure from the crown of the dark glossy head to the slender, well-sandalled feet.

The de Tencin woman was from the very first secretly jealous of Aissé. And she resented, with the venomous resentment of vice, this young girl's inherent purity. She did her best even to prejudice Madame de Ferriol against Aissé, and from the date of that visit to Pont de Veyle Aissé noticed a diminution of her *maman's* indifferent kindness.

For Aissé had begun to realise in groping fashion, not formulating her discovery to herself, that Madame de Ferriol's kindness—alternating as it did with fits

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aissé

of peevish discontent, when nothing the girl did seemed right—was, even as far back as her earliest years at the Hôtel, largely due to indifference. Aissé sensed too, without knowing why, that her protectress was harassed and had her heart elsewhere. As for the Président, he seemed a cipher in his home and appeared to find his chief relaxation from his business in the pleasures of the table.

The girl was lonely. She had not made friends among her fellow-pupils at the convent, it being customary to keep the aristocratic students at convent-classes somewhat rigorously apart out of school-hours, and perhaps Aissé was almost the only person who did not know more or less that there was a mystery surrounding her, and that she was not altogether what she seemed.

It is true that her adopted brothers were still her dearest friends and companions, but they had long outgrown the nursery and were taken up with their own studies. Pont de Veyle, old for his age, made much of and brought forward, had become precocious and self-centred, treating the pretty Aissé with an almost unnecessary politeness when they met, but having little to do with her save in the presence of their elders. Of d'Argental the girl saw more, for he was always trying to escape the vigilance of his tutors and Aissé was as ever his confidante. But d'Argental, frank, delightful boy as he always remained, was, after all, only a boy, some years younger than herself, and towards whom her sentiment was mainly maternal. And Aissé, amid the vague perplexities of her budding womanhood, longed rather to receive than to give maternal tenderness.

Had Madame de Villette lived more in Paris, Aissé's cravings might to a certain extent have been satisfied. For notwithstanding an appearance of outward frivolity there was so much in that charming lady of the true womanly—how else would she have enchained for thirty-five years Henry St John's facile devotion?—

The Roses of Ablon

that the lonely child might have found in her friend of Ablon a sympathetic counsellor and guide.

But the Ablon episode was for the time being ended. Madame de Villette was at her own country place, Marcilly. Her step-children made claims upon her time, and there is no question that she did her duty to them most thoroughly.

Through all her confusions and doubts Aissé clung to the belief that she was really a daughter of the de Ferriols. None had ever told her otherwise. But more and more now, as she thought over the contradictory elements of the situation, did it appear strange and ambiguous. That was the great puzzle which lay at the back of Aissé's mind. Why did she find so little of the mother in her "*maman*"—so far at least as concerned her "*maman's*" relation to herself? It was plain enough that Madame de Ferriol adored her eldest son, and though she cared less for d'Argental, he too had a large measure of maternal solicitude. But, instinctively, Aissé felt herself to be an alien within the gates.

Alas! if truth be told, Madame de Ferriol had not improved during the years of her intimacy with d'Uxelles. The child had no suspicion of the nature of that tie and yet her sensitive girlhood revolted dimly from it. Long afterwards she grew to be sorry for and almost sympathetic with Madame de Ferriol in her sufferings from d'Uxelles's waning affection.

The girl understood better then. By that time, the door of knowledge of good and evil had been opened for Aissé in a manner of which now in this spring of her lily-bloom she could hardly have dreamed.

It was not long, however, before the revelation came.

Aissé was a little over fifteen when news arrived from Constantinople of the Ambassador's serious illness. He had had a seizure of some sort; his mind had been

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

affected—though this was not told to Aïssé—and it appeared doubtful whether he would ever again be his old self—whether indeed he would become well enough to return to France.

The girl's distress was great. One dull autumn afternoon she went alone to the little chapel in the convent—the same where she had been accustomed to confess to Father François, and kneeled there in prayer for the restoration of her beloved protector. She kneeled a long time before the altar. The grey November light, entering through a palely-tinged window, gradually faded with the approach of dusk, so that the cruder ornamentation of the little chapel softened into an harmonious blur and the pictures and images of saints on either side of the sanctuary became as shadows of a more beautiful reality. All was indistinct, except an upraised figure upon the Cross, upon which a dying sunbeam seemed to have concentrated, and the benignant face of the Holy Mother, that was illuminated by the red light of the pendant lamp kept ever burning before the altar.

That light fell too upon Aïssé as she kneeled—her shoulders drooping, her hands clasped tensely, her great eyes raised in an agony of supplication, her slight form showing the delicate curves of early maturing womanhood; her face nevertheless still that of an exquisite child.

Tears streamed down her pale cheeks. She prayed with her whole soul to *le bon Dieu* that he would save her more than father. The loss of Father François had taught her what separation by death meant, and as she implored the intercession of the Blessed Virgin and of the Apostles she joined the name of Father François to that of her favourite minor saints. A fervour of religious enthusiasm possessed the girl. In those days Aïssé was passionately devout. When she rose from her knees her heart felt somewhat lightened of its

The Roses of Ablon

burden. She believed that *le bon Dieu* had heard her prayer and would give her the life of her beloved Aga.

The prayer was answered. But in the after time of shock and disillusionment Aïssé asked herself, as many another unhappy woman has likewise upon occasion asked herself, whether God had not mocked her faith and cursed instead of blessing her in that granted prayer.

CHAPTER V

HIS EXCELLENCY

It was in early spring of the following year—1811—that the Ambassador was pronounced well enough to be brought back to France.

He had been for many months incapable of attending to his diplomatic duties or of managing his own affairs, which were administered by an official in charge, and it was matter for surprise and satisfaction that his mental balance should have been recovered as speedily and effectually as appeared the case.

Without understanding the conditions of his illness, Aissé confidently believed that his recovery was due to her unremitting prayers. Nevertheless Comte Charles de Ferriol's constitution was utterly shattered by the seizures—he had had more than one, which we may assume to have been of an epileptic nature, greatly brought on by the manner of his life—and the broken-down old man of sixty-four, looking years over his age, who returned to the Hôtel de Ferriol in care of a physician and of his confidential valet, was a very different person from the hale, brilliant and much-considered gentleman whom his relatives had seen depart a few years before.

Much thought was given by Madame la Présidente—and by the heavy, business-cumbered Président likewise—to the arrangements for housing the Ambassador. This from motives of policy as well as of family affection. For the Ambassador, as he continued to be called, was rich, possessing a fair fortune apart from his liberal pension, and it was a point of importance to the Paris de Ferriols that he should be an inmate of

His Excellency

their establishment and contribute becomingly to its maintenance. On this score they need have had no fear; niggardliness had never been a characteristic of Count Charles de Ferriol.

A suite of apartments was prepared for him in a wing running out at the back of the Hôtel, and chosen for its quietude—a condition upon which his physicians had laid great stress. The suite looked upon the little garden of the Hôtel, which had formerly been rather neglected, but in which now the trees and shrubs were trimmed and flowering bulbs planted in the borders. The suite consisted of a spacious *salon* and bedrooms, with ante-chambers and accommodation for servants, and occupied the whole first floor of the wing, with the exception of one room, also looking upon the garden. This had been the children's schoolroom and was still retained as a class-room for Pont de Veyle and d'Argental when they were at home and took lessons from various tutors and professors of knightly accomplishments. Aïssé did her studies in her own little apartment, which was on the top floor of the house.

The return of her Aga seemed the greatest event that had yet occurred in Aïssé's life. She waited for it in anxious anticipation, counting the hours, and yet with a vague, nervous dread at the back for which she could not account. She had begged to meet him on his arrival. But it had been decided by his physician that he should be kept as free as possible from excitement upon reaching the house, and he was therefore carried in a sort of sedan-chair at once upstairs to his own apartment. There his brother and sister-in-law received him. They remained with him only a short time, leaving him to the doctors—the one who had accompanied him and the de Ferriol physician, with whom the other was to consult before departing again for Constantinople.

Aïssé, waiting outside the orange boudoir, eagerly

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

questioned Madame. But Madame was out of temper—and indeed the absence on a politic mission of the Maréchal d'Uxelles, and his silence concerning matters upon which she desired to be informed, had given her cause for rufflement—so she answered the child snappishly, telling her she would see for herself how her guardian was as soon as it should be his pleasure to send for her. She looked at the girl with an odd gleam in her eyes—long and narrow like those of the rest of the de Tencins—which puzzled Aïssé. Madame may have been wondering what would be the feelings of that battered old Grand Türk when he should behold the beautiful young slave of whom he was the possessor.

Trembling, longing, worshipping the memory of him which she had kept enshrined in her heart, Aïssé waited for the summons. It came on the next afternoon. She was bidden to go alone into her guardian's presence.

Aïssé closed the door upon the landing softly behind her and stood in the ante-chamber, which was separated from the further *salon* by heavy velvet curtains hanging across an archway. She hesitated still after she had drawn the curtains and stood silently for a minute gazing at her lord before he was aware that she had entered. He was half reclining on a couch between the windows, one of which coming low down, with a window seat beneath it, was open, showing a narrow ledge, partly designed for ornament, partly for support, along which was trained the thick stem of an old wistaria creeper now in flower.

Aïssé's eyes were caught by the purple clusters of bloom against the young green of trees beyond. As in emotional crises one's attention may be attracted to some trivial object that remains for ever afterwards connected in the mind with that particular scene or occasion, so the scent of those wistaria flowers floating in through the half-opened casement, and filling Aïssé's

His Excellency

nostrils, brought back to her in after years the thrilling sense, half joy, half fear, that stirred her girlish bosom now.

When she first saw the Ambassador her soul was overswept by a wave of tenderest pity. She was deeply distressed at the change she beheld in her adored Aga. He who on that last evening, which she well remembered, had appeared a prince among men—so brave, strong and splendid in his satin and lace, orders on his breast, and his sword with the jewelled hilt by his side, erect of bearing and distinguished above all his peers—seemed now a bent and dilapidated old man.

His lower limbs, partially covered by a silken-striped Eastern rug, looked shrunken and were afflicted with spasmodic twitchings.

His skin was of a dull greyish hue, with reddish blotches upon the forehead: his cheeks were flabby in spite of his thinness, and the face having been left unshorn during his illness showed straggling tufts of iron-grey beard and whisker. He had always worn a moustache, which had been carefully trimmed and twisted at the ends, and had added to his military air. Now it dropped lumpily on either side of his mouth, the muscles of which were relaxed so that the under-lip hung in a manner that was at once pathetic and revolting. Instead of the stately peruke or natty bob-wig he had been wont to wear, his own dank iron-grey hair was combed back and tied behind with a black ribbon leaving bald patches above the temples.

To Aïssé, only his eyes, under their bushy iron-grey brows, deep-set, penetrating and kindly, when he looked at her, seemed to have retained something of the old flashing vigour.

But he did not at first look at her, his gaze being fixed upon the valet, Bénéit, who, with back to the door, was occupied over some service for his master. Aïssé had advanced a step or two into the chamber

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

before the Ambassador became aware of her entrance. Then, as she was moving more rapidly towards him, he stopped her by a gesture that the sensitive Aïssé fancied to be a rebuff.

He seemed taken aback at sight of her. His face, pushed forward as he half raised himself from the sofa, quivered as if he had no command over it; his eyes dilated. For a second or two he mouthed in helpless fashion. At last he exclaimed:

"Stay there! Let me look at you."

The girl waited obediently. His gaze, eagerly running her up and down, would have alarmed her but for its exceeding tenderness.

He gave a hoarse murmur of satisfaction, motioning her to remain at a little distance, while with a curious æsthetic enjoyment he took in every detail of her appearance.

He saw against the rich background of crimson velvet *portière* a slender figure in a white dress, with a broad red sash set just underneath the delicate curves of the young girl's bosom. Round the soft throat was clasped the amber necklace he had sent her. The slim, bare arms and little hands, drooping from out of the lace ruffles at her elbow, were crossed submissively below her breast. She wore shoes with scarlet heels arching beneath her high instep. Race spoke in every line of her. Her beautiful dark hair, confined under a sort of snood of scarlet, framed her oval face, and was caught back in the silken scarlet behind her ears, falling in a rippling mass to below her waist. Her cheeks were flushed to brilliant carmine, and her mouth was deeply red, the white teeth flashing between the curves of her lips. Her lustrous, almond-shaped eyes shone like stars beneath their sweeping lashes. There was not a single flaw discoverable in her. Truly of Aïssé it might have been said, "Behold, thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee."

His Excellency

Charles, Comte de Ferriol, had always been somewhat of the artist in his attitude towards women, never rushing upon the desired object, but content to wait the psychological moment. Essentially gourmet rather than gourmand, he would have toyed with his glass, regaling himself with the fragrance of its bouquet, and admiring the colour of the wine before he put it to his lips. He who was learned in the sensuous love-lore of the East, and had hitherto needed only to express his desire in order to have it gratified, was not one to spoil his promised delight by snatching at it too ruthlessly.

The girl made him a low curtsy. His look held her as in a spell, but there was a hint of terror in the fascination. A movement on the part of the valet made Monsieur de Ferriol alive to the man's presence, and he turned sharply to him and bade him leave the room. Benoît was an old servant, and hesitated, venturing to remind his master that the doctor had said he must be careful in no way to tax his strength. De Ferriol answered angrily, bidding the fellow place a chair for Mademoiselle and depart. There was a jerkiness and excitability in his manner of speech which startled Aissé.

The valet drew forward a low seat, placing it a little way from the couch, and left the chamber, looking reluctantly back at his master as he drew the curtains of the door behind him, and at the same time making to Aissé an almost imperceptible sign of caution.

Now Aissé was alone with her guardian. Her first impulse had been to rush to his arms—to pour forth her joy at his return, and to assure him of her unremitting devotion. But something, which she could not define, held her back, and she stood silent and abashed.

The Ambassador got up from the couch, and the girl noticed wonderingly that he trembled. It was for the first time perhaps in his relations with women, for Charles de Ferriol realised that he had not himself under

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

due command. The man who has invariably satisfied his own desires, without regard to the cost they may entail on others, is apt at a time of physical weakness to become over-ridden by them. He did not perceive the bewildered shrinking in Aïssé. He saw only the peerless maiden he had purchased long ago, for whose flowering he had waited—a perfect blossom here before him ready for the plucking.

His lower limbs dragged a little. He moved with difficulty. The girl's passion of pity was again aroused. She went forward, and with another reverence took his hand and kissed it, murmuring some incoherent words of welcome, and beseeching him to return to his couch. With a touch of his old gallantry he raised her, and himself bending over her hand pressed it to his lips.

"I salute la belle Haidée!" he said. "Truly a child no longer, but a woman lovelier than I had dreamed."

The girl protested shyly. "I am but a child. If Aïssé pleases thee, Monsieur mon Aga, Aïssé is happy indeed."

"Thou dost please me very well, my little Aïssé," he answered. "Nevertheless thou art not a child, my dear, but a small sweet woman, and as such I must henceforth treat thee. Come, sit beside me, and let me hear all that has happened to thee since I went away."

Ignoring the chair which the valet had placed, he led her to his sofa and put her beside him, holding her hand all the time as they sat there, and fondling it with his lips. These continuous caresses disturbed her. Involuntarily she withdrew her hand, the red rushing again to her cheeks. He did not seem displeased, but watched her, smiling, admiringly critical.

"Why," he said, "they told me that my Aïssé was like a lily, but here is a pink Circassian rose. My faith! I prefer the rose. But thou hast no need to blush when it is I who kiss thy hand, or to droop that pretty face on which I love to look."

His Excellency

And he put his hands beneath her chin and lifted her face until she was forced to raise her eyes to his. His gaze, with its old paternal kindness, reassured her.

"Tell me that the heart of Aïssé has not changed," he asked with winning tenderness. She could scarcely speak for emotion, but shook her head, and her dark eyes swam with tears.

"Mon Aga!" she murmured, and with the prettiest gesture, savouring of her Oriental birth, she slipped to her knees, and raising his hands held them to her forehead, as if in token of gratitude and submission to his will.

He was enchanted. The artless devotion of the East seemed to him combined with the grace and polish of the West. Old and worn out as he was he had a sensation of leaping into the delicious unknown. There was something so exquisitely fresh about Aïssé that she almost made him feel as if he were a young lover experiencing the magic passion for the first time.

"It is I who should kneel to thee," he exclaimed, and drew her up again to his side, more gently and quietly than before. The stirrings of this sweet emotion in him checked for a moment the promptings of Oriental sensualism. Aïssé felt the change, without understanding its cause. He began to talk to her very kindly, much as he might have done in old days. He wanted to give the girl confidence, and could he have restrained himself longer he might have succeeded for that day at least.

His short-lived reserve was calculated. He did not forget her conventional upbringing, though at the same time he counted upon a sort of race-comprehension in her which, when he should attempt Oriental methods of wooing, would, he believed, come to his aid.

It was a new and delightful experience, this listening to her innocent self-revelations. In answer to his questions Aïssé gave an account of all that had interested and occupied her during his absence. Her estimate of herself

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

was modest. She said that she was not clever, but that she had remembered his wishes and had studied diligently to improve herself both at school and at home, where "*maman*" had had her instructed in the manners of good Society, so that if it were his command that she should go into the world he might not be ashamed of his little Aïssé. Not that it was her desire to take part in worldly pleasure—the young *dévoté* made that clear. Only if it should be his will. She spoke of Father François, and of her sorrow at the priest's death. The Ambassador then asked her how she liked the Abbé de Tencin, and if he had ever been her confessor.

Aïssé was not without diplomacy, and after some hesitation she stated sweetly that M. l'Abbé, being so highly placed a personage, it was not fitting that one so insignificant as herself should presume to form any opinion touching him or his affairs. But that, having regard to those weighty matters of Church and State with which he must be concerned, she was always careful in no way to obtrude herself upon his notice.

At which the Ambassador laughed and patted her shoulder, and told her she had done well, and that he was glad to find that she had so much tact and discernment, but that to him she might speak freely.

After that he interrogated her cautiously but searchingly upon the affair of my lord Bolingbroke's visits to Ablon, and on the friendship between the great English minister and Madame la Marquise de Villette. Whereupon Aïssé had launched into enthusiastic encomium of these two dear friends—of their devotion to each other, and especially to herself. Ah! she cried, their goodness was deep and true. And verily it seemed that never had Aïssé heard from the lips of Monsieur de Bolingbroke or Madame de Villette any word of counsel from which a young girl might not benefit. Her innocent story of those times at Ablon—of the roses and the daisy-chains in the garden, and of Madame de

His Excellency

Villette's tender, maternal kindness to herself—seemed to interest de Ferriol, though he laughed again in an odd, cynical fashion.

When she had answered all his questions he put his hand over her hair in the old caressing fatherly way.

"I see well that thou art a lily, my dear. He who has the good fortune to enjoy thy garnered fragrance may count himself a happy mortal."

There was a touch of solemnity in de Ferriol's tone. The girl gazed at him wistfully. She was growing accustomed to him. She did not shrink away when he put his arm round her. Instead, she nestled nearer to his side.

"Thou art glad to see me, Aïssé?" he whispered breathlessly. "Thou art glad that I have come back to thee again?"

"But yes, I have thought of nothing else save thy coming since I heard that thou wast better of thy illness," she answered, lapsing unconsciously from the grand manner of respect with which children and young persons spoke to their parents and superiors into the familiar *tutoiement* he had begun, and which she mostly used to her adopted brothers—not so much with Pont de Veyle as with d'Argental.

"My Aïssé grieved when she heard that I was ill?" he asked. "Though I am well now," he added with a certain wrathful defiance in his voice, "well and strong and like to live for many a year yet—to live and make thee happy, I hope, Aïssé. Tell me—didst thou grieve when I was ill?"

"It was as if the sun had ceased to shine for Aïssé," she answered softly. "But I grieved most because there was nothing I could do for my dear lord—except to pray—"

"And you prayed for me—you cared so much?" he asked, looking intently into her face, so that she shyly lowered her sweet eyes.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aissé

"Nay, it seemed to me that were my Aga to be taken from me there would be little left in the world for Aissé," she said. "But I knew when I prayed that the good God heard my prayer. I knew that the Holy Mother had interceded for the life of him I loved, and I came from the altar comforted. And see," the girl went on in her simplicity, "the good God has indeed heard my prayer, since to-day my Aga is here."

"I wish that I had come before illness overtook me," he said. "Most assuredly I would have come, had I known what was awaiting me."

And with that he drew her closer within his arm, where she lay content as babe might have done. Then some instinct, or it may have been the quick beating of his heart, affrighted her. She fluttered like a bird in his grasp, and would have drawn away, but that now he held her tight. Her fluttering efforts to escape, and the feeling of her young rounded form against his breast, stirred the Oriental in him again. He forgot that he had resolved to win her spontaneous trust and affection, forgot that he had meant to respect her Western upbringing and the purity he had been so anxious to preserve. He who had been satiated by women educated to their inevitable destiny—he who wanted to win the love of one that should give through woman's natural instinct, and not through knowledge of what was expected of her, as had been the manner of other women in his power—forgot the restrictions he had determined to impose upon himself. He spoke burning words of which the child could not understand the drift. Then, stooping his head, and pressing her to him, he kissed her lips in a way which roused—but so vaguely—the trouble and remembrance of that last embrace before his departure—that embrace from the memory of which she had ever since instinctively revolted. She submitted, feebly struggling, telling herself

His Excellency

that to him she owed so much that she must not rebel against his caresses.

Then there came a knock at the ante-room door, and unheard by the Ambassador someone approached. The velvet *portière* parted, causing a slight rattling noise as it was drawn back upon the brass rod.

De Ferriol uttered a sharp ejaculation and released Aïssé.

The girl started to her feet and retreated sideways, intensely relieved, yet covered with shame and confusion at sight of the valet, who stood deferentially bowing with a tray in his hand, a glass and a phial upon it.

He was an elderly man—Monsieur Bénait—who had been for a long time in the Ambassador's employ. A lean, suave, smooth-stepping person, iron-grey in dress, iron-grey in face—the type of a confidential body-servant who, while careful to guard his own interests, was nevertheless honestly devoted to those of his master.

"Mort de Dieu!" swore the Ambassador, furiously. "What do you mean, fellow, by entering when I have not rung for you?"

Bénait made cringing apologies. His Excellency would remember that he had bidden him return with the draught an hour before that fixed for the dinner of the family, to which his Excellency had signified the intention of descending. For certain, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur would not have forgotten that it was Monsieur le Président's last evening in Paris, seeing that the Parliament of Metz claimed that gentleman's distinguished presence, and that he had deferred his departure to the last moment in order to welcome Monsieur his brother.

De Ferriol cut short Bénait's sycophantic reminders with an oath and a growl, and bade the man leave him until he was sent for.

But Bénait held his ground firmly. He was de-

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

solated to disobey his master, but his master's health was to be considered. Had not the doctor delivered to him—Bénoit—the most urgent injunctions that on no account should Monsieur l'Ambassadeur omit to take his medicine precisely at the hour fixed. Above all, that Monsieur should preserve himself tranquil and repose himself for a time before the fatigues of dinner. . . . His Excellency would pardon this humble servant; and Mademoiselle also . . .

Bénoit cast a meaning glance at Aïssé as he handed the glass of medicine to the Ambassador. The girl, very white and tremulous, had collected herself sufficiently to behave with dignity, and requested Monsieur l'Ambassadeur to excuse her as she had some duties to perform for Madame de Ferriol before the dinner hour.

With a formal curtsey she slipped backward through the curtains before the Ambassador could issue any order for her to remain.

Once outside the ante-room Aïssé paused not a second, but flew along the corridor, past the door of the boys' study, from which came the sound of d'Argental's voice as he practised sword-play with his fencing tutor, then up a narrow little staircase, dimly lighted by a window in the roof, and at last stopped at her own room. She rushed within, closed and locked the door, and stood, her limbs shaking, her hands clasped upon her heaving bosom, her dark eyes dilating. She glanced backward to the door, seeming fearful lest she should have been followed even into this maiden sanctuary. Then at sight of her familiar belongings—the white bed, with the crucifix hanging above her pillow; the image of the Blessed Virgin on the tiny altar dressed with flowers, and with her *prie-dieu* before it; the table with her lesson books, the open window and blue heaven above—the breast of the poor frightened child beat again more freely. *Le bon Dieu* was everywhere; *le*

His Excellency

bon Dieu would protect her. She made the sign of the Cross, and prayed her customary evening prayer:

"Nous vous supplions, Seigneur de visiter cette demeure, et d'éloigner d'elle toutes les embûches de l'ennemi: que vos saints Anges y habitent pour nous conserver en paix, et que votre bénédiction soit toujours sur nous. Ainsi soit il."

CHAPTER VI

THE CASKET

Aïssé, pausing only to curtsy generally to the party assembled at the table, glided like a shadow into the seat to which she was beckoned by d'Argental. Both the boys were present at this meal—made more of a family ceremony from its being the first which the Ambassador had joined, and also because of Monsieur le Président's impending departure for Metz. Pont de Veyle—a well-grown, fine-mannered youth—naturally acquitted himself with aplomb, concealing his surprise at the ravages which illness had made in the Ambassador, and offering respectful and well-turned felicitations on the presence of his uncle once more among them. D'Argental, less polished, less glib of tongue, stared at the old gentleman with such persistent wonder that the Ambassador demanded testily what his nephew saw in his face to honour it with such close scrutiny. Whereat the tactless boy returned with brutal candour, prompted by a genuine pity, that in his recollection of Monsieur l'Ambassador he had not figured to himself the ripe age to which Monsieur must have attained, and that he was very sorry to see his uncle looking so ill and old.

The Ambassador flushed an angry red, and laughing grimly, bade d'Argental have more heed to his manners and less to truth if he wished to get on in the world. Madame de Ferriol, whose demeanour alternated between a fussy effort to please her brother-in-law and peevish abstraction in her own secret anxieties, sharply reproved d'Argental, while the Président, absorbed in his dinner, made a clumsy diversion by pressing on his

The Casket

brother a dish of boar's head, which Bénédict, standing watchful behind his master's chair, whispered that the doctor had forbidden him to eat.

On the whole the dinner was not an harmonious repast. The Ambassador was uncertain in temper, though occasionally there showed a flash of his former courtliness when he tried to pull himself together and pay some compliment to his sister-in-law, and to Aïssé, whom his fierce eyes, under their heavy brows, sought continually. The girl hardly dared to look at him, so torn was she between pity and the vague repugnance that was gradually becoming more and more pronounced, and which, as it grew, filled her with shame and remorse. In truth, it was not pleasant to watch the Ambassador, though one could not help admiring the spirit with which he fought against bodily weakness, and the way in which he strove to control his nervous twitchings, and to maintain something at least of his old correctness of demeanour. It was quite evident that he would have been much better in his own room, equally evident that he meant to play the man so long as there was any manhood left in him. The young folk were thankful when they had permission to retire.

"Well, and what dost think now of thy hero?" said d'Argental bluntly to Aïssé, as they halted on the upper landing. "Bénédict says thou'lt have to amuse his Excellency. He will be sure to send for thee every day, and Bénédict bade us tell thee that it is not good for his master's health that he should be crossed. Didst thou cross him to-day, Aïssé, seeing he was in so bad a temper this evening?"

"It was thou who crossed him," put in Pont de Veyle. "He was well enough before thy unlucky speech. But, Aïssé, did he bring presents for us?"

"He said that he had brought some presents, but he has not given them yet," said Aïssé, shirking the other inquiry.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

"I believe thou *didst* cross him, Aïssé," persisted d'Argental, "for he looked at thee as if he were an ogre and desired to crunch thee between his mumbling jaws. Say, little sister, how was he to thee when thou didst visit him this afternoon?"

"He was all goodness and affection," the girl answered quickly. "He is my hero, and I will speak no word against him—no, never, never, *never*—so there, d'Argental. And if he is not so strong and so handsome as he was, or so grand a man—well, sick people are apt to change, I've heard . . . so we must mind our speech the more and be careful not to wound or annoy him. It was not kind of thee, d'Argental, to hurt thy uncle by telling him he had grown old."

"I did not mean to hurt him," said d'Argental, moved to compunction. "Nevertheless, 'tis true that he has grown old and ugly, and when he asked me I said what I thought."

"And showed yourself a blundering oaf," put in Pont de Veyle. "What matters it to us whether our uncle be old and ugly. We must pay him due respect all the same. It is not everyone whose uncle has been His Majesty's Ambassador to the Infidels. Moreover, our uncle is well-pensioned by the State, with permission to retain the honours and dignities of his position at the Sultan's court. We are honoured by the connection, and Aïssé, above all, should be assiduous to please Monsieur l'Ambassadeur and to soothe his humours. I wager that she will not find it difficult."

"There was a slight, satirical smile on the youth's lips. "Figure to yourselves, my children," he continued, "what an advantage it will be to us that the Ambassador should make his residence here. With the two establishments in one we shall cut a finer figure, and already are we the gainers. The service was better to-day, and the *chef* showed plainly that he is aware of what is due to an Ambassador's palate." In which

The Casket

remarks Pont de Veyle summed up the general feeling at the Hôtel de Ferriol in the minds of both masters and dependants.

Accordingly Aïssé disciplined herself into a trusting and grateful state of heart when she obeyed the next summons sent her by her lord and master. Yet she crossed herself instinctively as she waited in the ante-room outside the red velvet *portière*.

It was Benoît who lifted the curtain. Aïssé saw that sunlight flooded the *salon*; the scent of the wistaria came to her nostrils again, and she had a glimpse of the Ambassador on his couch with the silken striped blanket over his knees. But Benoît half dropped the curtain as he whispered confidentially after giving her a respectful greeting.

"His Excellency had been eagerly awaiting the coming of Mademoiselle. He was better; much better. But would Mademoiselle be so good as to bear in mind that above all the doctor desired that his patient should not be excited or contradicted. If Mademoiselle would have the great kindness to conform as far as she could to the wishes of Monsieur and to preserve him in a happy and satisfied frame of mind, Mademoiselle would speedily see the good results. . . . Already Mademoiselle had done much towards furthering the recovery of his Excellency."

Aïssé murmured that she would do her best to please Monsieur l'Ambassadeur, but she could not help feeling a sinking at her heart.

De Ferriol called imperiously:

"Let Mademoiselle Aïssé enter. And as for you, Benoît, you are an officious rascal, and have my orders to absent yourself until I shall ring for you."

Benoît instantly drew the curtain apart with a flourish. "If his Excellency will but deign to remember the orders of Monsieur le Médecin, and not allow that time to be too long," insinuated the valet, who

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

knew exactly how much he might and might not say to his master. Then he turned and left the room, and with a low bow specially directed to Aïssé. For Monsieur Benoît was a gentleman of discernment and glimpsed the possibility of a young mistress. Benoît had once been in the establishment of the famous old Duc de Lauzun, the some time lover and husband of La Grande Mademoiselle, and he remembered when that aged reprobate had led to the altar a girl who might easily have been his grand-daughter. Not that Benoît, knowing the ins and outs of things, seriously thought the Ambassador would marry Mademoiselle Aïssé. Still, there was no knowing what folly a sick old man might not perpetrate. And this was a Christian country, and as yet a seraglio in the Faubourg St Germain was not a recognised institution.

With the fall of the curtain behind Benoît, Aïssé's trembling came back upon her. She stood with head bent, not daring to look on her guardian—nervous, shy cold and very white—together a different being from that blushing Eastern rose-maiden who had burst before on the Ambassador's delighted vision. So forlorn and frail a morsel of humanity did she appear that the chivalrous part of the man's nature was touched; also he, too, had been disciplining himself, and he called her to him in a kind, gentle voice that reminded her of her "deliverer" and gave her courage.

"Come, do not be afraid of me, my child, I am glad to see my Aïssé again."

He rose and advanced a step as he had done on the former occasion, receiving her with a more formal courtesy than their relative positions at all required him to show. He did not ask her to sit beside him on the couch, but without protest allowed her to place herself upon a stool some little distance from him. Nor did he fondle her hands or attempt to caress her. In fact, he failed in no detail that should tend to restore her

The Casket

confidence and renew the old affectionate bond, with, as he hoped, a new element introduced into the more paternal relationship of former years. Nevertheless it was a strange and sudden leap from the position of father to that of lover, and de Ferriol had not duly calculated his foothold in making it. But he fancied that he understood women in all their varieties of age and type. A certain shock was sometimes necessary, he thought, to open the eyes of ignorance, and it had been his experience that the recoil was often followed by a swing of the pendulum in the contrary direction.

Monsieur de Ferriol believed that he knew the way to warm Aissé into responsiveness. She must be coaxed and tempted like a little bird that one woos over the window-threshold by spreading dainties inside the ledge; and if, as was natural, the bird flew back, scared at the captor's touch, it should be allowed to retreat and cunningly coaxed anew. So to-day he laid no finger upon her, while for a few minutes he talked in a subdued manner meant to re-assure her—though she might, had she been alive to it, have detected the thrill of suppressed excitement in his voice. Also the signs of agitation in his nervously-twitching hands, which he extended to her with apparent effort, saying:

"My child, I am still weak as you see, and you have seated yourself so far from me that it fatigues me somewhat to bend forward in order to hear what you say."

Instantly the girl drew her stool closer, and he patted her hand gratefully, then told her to fetch a casket that stood on the table near.

"Young girls like pretty things," he said, "and I have brought a few for you, Aissé. It has given me pleasure to see that you wear the amber beads I sent you, and they become you well. But now it is time you had something finer and more suitable to a grown-up young lady."

The girl brought the casket, a little hesitant, but

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

yet with a touch of childish anticipation. It was richly chased; a beautiful thing in itself, and large enough to hold a good many small gifts.

"That is for you and all that is in it," said the Ambassador. "I have brought other presents for the rest of the family."

This was not strictly true, for he had really intended to divide the contents of the casket between Aïssé and his sister-in-law and various female friends. But the Ambassador found it useful to keep a store of women's gew-gaws, so none of the others need go neglected.

He showed her how to open the casket and heaped upon her such valuables as Aïssé had never dreamed of possessing—a chain of gold and pearls, jewelled clasps, bracelets, a girdle of uncut gems, baubles of all kinds, and with them dainty scarves and veils of silken gauze such as Eastern ladies wore. She turned the things over with interest, but her childlike pleasure was spoiled by the lurking fear, and her awakened woman's instinct warned her of danger behind.

He saw the strained, uncertain look in her eyes, while he made her pin the brooches into her dress, and himself clasped the bracelets on her arms, and put the chain round her neck. But he was careful—at least until the close of the visit—not to risk offending her again.

On this occasion Benoît did not return and interrupt the interview, but when Aïssé rose herself and shyly begged that he would now excuse her, he did not at once urge her to remain. She was more coy than most young women, he thought to himself, but for that very reason did she seem to him better worth the winning. As she stood before him with her softly-flushed cheeks and scarlet bow of a mouth unconsciously inviting his caress, it would perhaps have been too much to expect that he would refrain from it. Yet to do Charles de Ferriol justice, the higher man in him battled with the

The Casket

lower before the lower man overcame the sense of desecration he felt in forcing those maiden lips to his own. At first he only took her hands, and drawing her to him besought her by a gesture that was almost humble.

The blood left Aissé's face; she shook her small, dark head slightly but determinedly, and, retreating a step, bent in so low a reverence that he could only see her hair and the curve of her pale cheek. Her voice faltered, but her words were resolute:

"Monsieur has forgotten that Aissé is too old to be embraced as a child."

"*Grand Dieu!*" exclaimed de Ferriol, angered and spurred to passion. "This is no child who thus plays the coquette. Since you have learned so much, Mademoiselle, it is time that you understood how a man may embrace a charming woman."

And with that he flung his arms round the dismayed girl, and kissed her on the lips, fiercely, clingingly.

"Little innocent! Didst think that I could be content always with such kisses as thou wouldst give thy father or thy guardian? Those kisses were mine, so long as thou wert a child. But now that thou art a woman, Aissé, it is kisses such as these that I claim—for they also are mine; verily, lawfully mine—bought—and at a high price. Yet no price could be too high for lips like these."

He kissed her again and again exultingly. She broke from him at last, scarlet-cheeked, sobbing, shaking all over. Believing that he was alluding to the trinkets he had given her as the purchase money for her kisses, she hastily unpinned the brooches from the front of her gown, and tore off the chain and bracelets. Then, gathering them all together in her hands she made as if she would have thrown them at his feet. Her action recalled him in a measure to himself.

"No, Aissé . . . no!" he cried. "*Mon Dieu!* I rate your kisses at a higher cost than those trumpery gew-

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

gaws. Keep the gauds—keep them—keep them, and do not anger me any more.”

Bewildered, outraged, but with the instinct of obedience swaying her, the girl drew back the trinkets, hesitated, then laid them in a heap within the casket.

“It is yours. You have mistaken me,” he said stormily; then muttered, “No matter, Bénédict will see to it.”

The girl stood with hands folded, her girlish bosom pulsating visibly, the tears wet on her cheeks, which were crimson with confusion. In her constitutional slowness to apprehend anything startlingly new, her mind, seizing mechanically on his words, “You have mistaken me,” she began to wonder whether she had in truth mistaken him, and whether it was not something in herself—the fact that she was woman now, and not a child as he had told her, which caused her to misinterpret caresses which as a child she had courted. She remembered how she had been wont to hold up her mouth to him for his good-night salutation. Why now should the touch of the same lips seem to sear her very soul? She realised vaguely that some spirit within her rebelled against this wanton rubbing off of her maiden bloom. She could not understand the trembling consciousness stirred in her own nature by the shock of his rude approaches—the consciousness of an element in the relations of man and woman, troublous, mysterious, full of undefined possibilities—terrible—or, might it not be?—beautiful. Yet who can say that the girl Aïssé had not some dim previsioning of that revelation of love which the future held in store for her, and sensed for the first time—though in contradictory fashion—capabilities in herself of which in her childish innocence she could not have dreamed.

The Ambassador himself must partially have guessed what was passing through the young girl's undeveloped mind, and, sensualist though he was, there

The Casket

is no doubt that he strove to respond to her innate guiding instinct of purity and her trust in him. It was characteristic of Aïssé all through her life, that in her dealings with men who loved her she invariably awakened at the end a more noble sentiment than at first she seemed to have inspired. De Ferriol's face softened as he looked at her, and he spoke in a gentler tone.

"Aïssé, you are a child no longer. It is time you should learn how a man, who, though he be old enough for you to have regarded him in the past almost as a father, has still retained his youthful vigour of heart—how such a man may feel towards a woman so adorable as you. Come back, Aïssé; I have been brusque. Forgive me, but come back." He held out his arms.

Aïssé looked at him reluctantly. She shook her head, then took a step towards him, but his obvious excitement, only half suppressed, made her pause.

"Come," he repeated imperiously, and rose, advancing, his hands twitching violently in his cagerness, his parted lips trembling. She hesitated. Then she saw that his eyes were deep and tender as she had known them of old. She dropped on her knees in a posture of exquisite abandonment, her upraised arms making a gesture of such graceful appeal that de Ferriol gazed at her in sheer rapture.

"By Allah and his prophet!" he cried, relapsing into Eastern imagery, "one drop of such wine is worth the empery of the world, and the fragrance of such sweetness is better than all the roses of Gulistan. Rise, my Aïssé, it is the lover and not the beloved who should kneel in supplication. Why, I am no ogre, my dear, that thou shouldst shrink from my touch."

He drew back, deeply wounded at the sight of the shivering repulsion she could not hide. Simultaneously a wave of compunction swept over the girl, bringing with it the recollection of all his past goodness, of all that she owed him and to him alone.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

She broke into a humble, fervid appeal.

"Mon Aga! how should Aïssé understand? My lord said that I had mistaken his meaning, and most assuredly I do not know what he would have of me. This only I know, that as a daughter would I continue to serve him. Oh! let me remain a child to my more than father, and I will worship and obey him, and devote myself to him alone until my life's end."

The man laughed bitterly.

"Until my life's end thou shouldst say, Aïssé. For me the sands in life's hour-glass are running low. I have not much time left in which to gather roses. And when I have reared the sweetest, fairest blossom that ever grew in Paradise, am I to be refused the plucking of that which is lawfully my own? "

The girl gazed at him like a helpless creature fascinated by a serpent.

"Get up!" said de Ferriol, harshly. "No more of this folly."

She rose slowly, casting a longing glance at the *portière*.

"If Monsieur will permit me, I beg to retire," she faltered.

His mood changed suddenly.

"Go!" he exclaimed. "Heaven forbid that Charles de Ferriol should force a woman against her will."

It was evident that he made a strong effort at self-control. He had been steadying himself by the head of the sofa; now he sank heavily upon the seat, his face darkly red, his eyes turned from her as though he did not trust himself to look at her retreating form. She paused, fearing he was ill.

"Shall I call Benoît?" she asked anxiously.

"No. . . . Yes. . . . Stay. Thou wilt come again, Aïssé?"

"Yes . . . yes . . ." she answered fearfully, "I will come if Monsieur wishes. And if . . ."

The Casket

But she dared not add the stipulation. A black cloud had come over his face; his eyes gleamed at her fiercely through it. She darted like a released bird to the doorway, and the velvet curtains closed behind her. On the threshold she met B noit and bade him go to his master. Once again she fled to her own chamber. This time her impulse was to rush into the dressing-closet and bathe her burning face in ice-cold water.

CHAPTER VII

THE WISTARIA

A DAY or two passed, during which time the Ambassador did not send for Aissé, and the girl went through a tempest of conflicting feelings. She had no one in whom she cared to confide. Father François was dead, and his successor at the convent—Aissé's confessor—was a hard-natured, ascetic type of man, unsympathetic to the girl, and from whom she naturally shrank. Yet even more did she shrink from the Abbé de Tencin. How was it possible to lay her hapless case before him!

The boys were too young to advise her, and in any case she would have hesitated to tell her perplexities to Pont de Veyle. Madame de Villette, of whom she might have asked maternal counsel, was away at her own country place of Marcilly.

Madame de Ferriol was of course the person to whom she should have gone, but, strange as it may seem, Aissé shrank from consulting her. She had an instinctive idea that Madame would side with the Ambassador, and besides that, Madame was occupied with the Maréchal d'Uxelles, who was now again in Paris, and Madame gave Aissé no opening for private talk. On the third day, however, a message having been conveyed to Aissé through Benoît that the Ambassador desired her presence after *déjeuner* in his *salon*, the girl resolved to make opportunity for speaking to Madame de Ferriol, and sought her protectress in the orange boudoir. But the sound of voices within caused her to pause on the threshold, and drove her away again. For one of the voices was that of Monsieur l'Abbé de Tencin.

The Wistaria

He often came to *déjeuner*, at which the children were always present, and to-day was here with the object of seeing the Ambassador, who now joined the early meal. It appeared that the Ambassador was better; the boys had been admitted yesterday to his apartments, and had come back highly pleased with sundry presents he had divided between them. They were very curious as to what he had brought Aïssé, for she had told them nothing of the contents of the casket.

The evening after her interview with her Aga she had found this in her own room—conveyed thither by Benoît—and she had not dared to return it. Now she clung to d'Argental when they went together to the *salle-à-manger*, duly making her obeisance with her adopted brothers to the Abbé, and receiving that eminent prelate's blessing. Poor little Aïssé, obsessed by her recent terror, seemed to perceive in Monsieur l'Abbé's face something of the same avid expression which had frightened her in the Ambassador's, and when she bowed her head for the prelatical benediction, and the priest's smooth fingers rested lingeringly upon her hair, a shiver of repugnance went through her of a piece with her shrinking from the Ambassador's furtive yet masterful caresses.

To-day, however, there was a marked difference between the demeanour of the two men towards Aïssé: that of the Abbé being a suave blend of the fatherly ecclesiastic and of the polished man of the world desirous to please a young and beautiful woman; that of the Ambassador haughty and resentful, so that, buff for the burning glances he cast continually upon the girl, one might have supposed her in mortal disgrace with her guardian and benefactor.

It was plain, in spite of his efforts to respond to the Abbé's unctuous civilities, that M. l'Ambassadeur was not in the best of humours. His manner was jerky, his face a curious colour, his eyes wild. He was, in truth,

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

both physically and mentally disturbed. His physician had been with him that morning and had strenuously insisted upon caution and quietude, suggesting a stay in the country as the best palliative for the state of excitement in which he found his patient. He had made the old man realise—and fight doggedly against the realisation—that for him the season of rose gathering was drawing to a close, and that unless he plucked at once the tempting blossom which lay beneath his hand, but which some unwonted scruple—a certain strange sense of sacrilege—made him hesitate to appropriate, he would never be able to call it his own. Thus de Ferriol was torn by the struggle between those two parts of himself—the higher and the lower nature, and it had yet to be seen which would prove conqueror.

The Abbé de Tencin was quick enough to grasp the situation. There is nothing like experience of the confessional to impart a knowledge of human nature, and M. l'Abbé had not attained the position he occupied without having made full use of his opportunities. He had never any difficulty in discovering evil intent, and the springs governing the moods of a jaded sensualist were like the page of a book lying open before his eyes. He read de Ferriol with ease. Where he was liable to error lay in his gauging of natures simple and pure of guile like that of Aïssé.

It was not for want of observation of the girl that he failed in understanding her. He had watched Aïssé growing up and had studied her closely. For he judged that such uncommon beauty, such a pliable disposition and the anomalous relation in which she stood to the de Ferriols, might combine to make her a useful instrument in his scheme of ambition could he gain a hold over her destiny. The Abbé realised that Aïssé was lovely enough to become a power, if she could be taught to use her charms cleverly. In those days when queens of the left hand were chosen without credentials save

The Wistaria

the capacity to play upon great men's weaknesses, an actress from behind the footlights, or a slave bought in the slave-market, might become virtual ruler of France, De Tencin looked far ahead, but after events proved that he had the gift of foresight.

So, though he was not over-pleased at discovering the Ambassador's designs upon Aïssé, Monsieur l'Abbé was astute enough to perceive that in the end he might turn those designs to his own advantage, and that a reversionary interest in the beautiful Circassian would perhaps suit him better than to attempt now to mould her to his purposes. He could afford to wait for that, just as by-and-by he waited until he had secured the Cardinal's hat for Dubois before he tried to obtain that honour for himself.

Balked of her interview with Madame de Ferriol, Aïssé sought her adopted brothers, hoping to shelter herself behind them when they went into *déjeuner*. D'Argental prated to her of some new exercises in sword-play which he was practising for his tutor that afternoon, and proudly showed her a little sword, with hilt of finest Eastern inlay, which had been one of the Ambassador's gifts to his nephew.

"It is a pity thou art a girl, Aïssé, and canst not cross blades with me," whispered the boy regretfully as they sat together at the lower end of the table.

"As for that," put in Pont de Veyle, "it would seem that girls should be taught the art of duelling, since the great Court ladies who quarrel about their lovers have taken to fight with steel instead of with tooth and nail."

"I care nothing about Court ladies and their lovers," returned d'Argental, "but I shall ask old Bénéoit if he will teach me how the Turks use their weapons."

"Why not Bénéoit's boot-black?" sneered Pont de Veyle. "I warrant he'll know as much as his master, and perhaps suit thee better."

D'Argental flushed and raised his voice unduly.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

"Pont de Veyle scoffs at me for liking to learn in what he calls low company. He is too fine to practice thrust and parry save such as the gentlemen at Court deal in. But say *I*, when a man goes to the wars it is rougher skill than that of Court duelling which he needs for killing the king's enemies."

The two boys, being of totally different characters and tastes, had many small passages-at-arms such as this which now their mother stopped, telling d'Argental that he would do better to copy more closely Pont de Veyle's habits and manners. For Pont de Veyle prided himself upon being something of a youth of fashion and a scholar into the bargain. He could translate from the Greek, and showed already a pretty wit in the making of madrigals, like those of the gay set of the Palais Royal, whereas d'Argental despised all these flowery arts and went in for manly pursuits befitting rather a soldier or a young country gentleman. Even in their dress they showed their dissimilarity: Pont de Veyle affecting a rich and sombre style, verging on the fastidious—his clothes being of harmonious shading; his waistcoats of delicately-embroidered satin, his lace ruffles of expensive filminess, while his long, lean legs were always encased in dark silk stockings; D'Argental, on the contrary, wearing a coarser make of hose, and his ruffles being of rougher thread and more effective pattern. D'Argental liked bright colourings—riotous reds and blues, and sleeves slashed with satin of a violently contrasting shade, when it was a question of wearing his best clothes; as a rule he preferred wool to silk. Pont de Veyle, as his mother would remark with satisfaction, took after the highly aristocratic de Tencins; d'Argental after the more homely de Ferriols, in whom the acquired polish appeared mostly confined to the Ambassador. Madame de Ferriol was very particular about the bringing up of her boys according to the more refined mode. She engaged their tutors,

The Wistaria

and watched over their studies with considerable care. The Président, being engrossed with financial matters and constantly away from home, left all such parental duties to his wife.

Aïssé received little more than silent notice during the meal, and was unconscious of that, for she sat below d'Argental and kept her eyes on the table. When the time came for the young people's dismissal they made the customary reverences before quitting their elders. As Aïssé curtsied to the Ambassador he put out his hand and touched her shoulder, from which hung a Smyrna scarf he had given her. •

"I am glad to see that one of my gifts—though it be the poorest—finds favour with Mademoiselle. But where is the chain I bought you, Aïssé, and the brooches? Why do you wear none of my gew-gaws?"

"It seemed to me that they were too fine for so simple an occasion," she answered stammeringly.

"Well—well. But they would become you, Aïssé. Put on the chain. . . . Thou art a pearl of the Orient thyself—and pearls match with pearls. Put on too the white dress with the scarlet ribbons with which thou camest to my apartment the first time."

She bowed submissively. He continued, speaking rather low and thickly, but in an eager and excited manner:

"Come to me this afternoon, Aïssé. Come, when I have rested, as that tyrant of a doctor orders. I will send Benoît to summon thee. Thou'lt come—say that thou wilt come, Aïssé."

"It shall be as Monsieur l'Ambassadeur pleases," she said obediently; but she was terrified, and as she backed to the door she cast an appealing look at Madame de Ferriol.

But Madame de Ferriol scarcely observed the girl. She was reading a letter that had just been brought from the neighbouring hôtel, and which she told her

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

brother was from the Maréchal d'Uxelles and related to certain rare books which, through the Abbé de Tencin, Monsieur l'Abbé Dubois had commissioned d'Uxelles to purchase in his stead for Dubois's collection. Both brother and sister being fully aware that this question of buying valuable Dutch editions covered tentative negotiations concerning the English succession in which my lord Bolingbroke was said to be involved.

There was no chance of aid or sympathy for poor Aïssé in this quarter. Madame de Ferriol went immediately to communicate with d'Uxelles, and the two men remained alone. • Truly a pair of wolves, between whom the poor little lamb was likely enough to have her snow-white fleece spoiled.

Aïssé put on her white satin frock and scarlet sash; but with what different feelings from those she had had on previous occasions, when her one thought had been to make herself attractive in her Aga's eyes. Now she feared to make herself attractive, and though he had bidden her wear his gold and pearl chain she could not bring herself to do so, and went bare necked, only veiling her shoulders again with the Smyrna scarf.

The dreaded summons came sooner than she expected. Monsieur de Ferriol gave himself small time for repose. The talk with the Abbé had not had a good effect upon him, physically or morally. Moreover, he had taken more wine at *déjeuner* than his physician would have approved. Consequently he was in an excited condition of mind and body and would not be satisfied till Benoît had been feverishly despatched to command Mademoiselle Aïssé's presence.

The girl went slowly down her dark little staircase. As she passed the door of her brothers' sitting-room she heard d'Argental's boyish voice in parley with Pont de Veyle.

She opened the door and looked in. It was a low panelled room with two windows crossed by iron bars—

The Wistaria

a remnant of their nursery days—and outside the windows ran that same narrow ledge, fringed with clusters of purple wistaria bloom, as in the Ambassador's *salon* further along. There was no drapery or upholstery in the lesson-room. In the middle stood an oak table of the kind now called gate-legged, scratched and notched where the children had jumped upon it or had sharpened their knife-blades against its edges or knocked it with their boots—it being d'Argental's favourite habit to sit on the table and kick his heels against its supports. There were some wooden stools and chairs, high-backed and hard. The only comfortable seat was a settee appropriated by Pont de Veyle, who had imported two cushions for it, one of which he had now placed at his back, the other beneath his legs, where they rested upon the arm of an adjoining chair, his raised knees forming a table for the large book over which he was poring. D'Argental was exercising with his sword-stick, making lunges at a dummy figure—a clumsy, mechanical contrivance wound up by clockwork. The boy flatly refused Aïssé's timid request that he would accompany her and crave permission to remain during her visit to the Ambassador's apartment.

“Go with thee! Not I! Here's a new stroke I must perfect for my fencing-master. Besides, I have no fancy to beard the ogre in his den. My faith, Aïssé, thou art safer alone than in my company. Our uncle favours thee far too highly for him to treat thee to his tempers; but more than once I have made him angry.”

Pont de Veyle looked curiously at Aïssé's flushed cheeks and reddened eyelids.

“It seems to me that Aïssé has put herself somewhat out of favour with the uncle,” he said. “What have you done, Aïssé? Are you afraid he will beat you? I should have thought that Monsieur l'Ambassadeur's taste was rather for kisses than for blows.”

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

Aïssé's face grew a deeper crimson. D'Argental laughed frankly.

"Then let him have all he wants, Aïssé. Kisses are cheap payment."

Pont de Veyle laughed too, but with a different inflexion in his voice.

"Kisses sometimes cost girls more than they care to pay," he observed with his old-man-of-the-world air.

"Oh, I understand not thy witty speeches, Pont de Veyle; they are too clever for me. It needs my friend Arouet to interpret them," exclaimed d'Argental, making a running thrust as he spoke at the clock-work dummy, which ran down now with a whirr. "See, Aïssé!" and the boy struck an attitude with his mimic weapon upraised. "If thy Aga should be angry and try to beat thee, call, and I will defend thee with my sword and with my life—ay!—as I swore to himself that I would do—dost thou not remember?"

"Aïssé had better not keep Monsieur the Grand Turk waiting any longer," said Pont de Veyle, "or she may find that he exacts too liberal a recompense."

Aïssé went out into the corridor, pondering, as she walked slowly along, upon d'Argental's words. The boy was right after all—kisses were cheap payment for all that her deliverer had done for her.

It appeared that Bénoit had been listening for her step in the corridor, for before she could knock the ante-room door was opened to her. He ushered her immediately through the curtains and, having had his orders, forthwith took his departure.

This time the Ambassador did not rise to receive her or offer her any greeting. He was sitting on the couch, his body bent a little forward, his lean hands on his knees, and she perceived that his fingers twitched more than usual. His face was darkly red, his under-lip hung, his eyes seemed to the girl to glare at her.

The Wistaria

"You have been long in coming," he said angrily. "Why this delay?"

Aïssé murmured an apology. She had been changing her dress as he desired, she said. His gaze went all over her as she stood before him in the white frock and broad scarlet sash with the red ribbons binding her hair. His face softened. With her natural sweetness, anxious to smooth over his displeasure, and remembering too her recent resolutions, she asked permission to bring the stool forward and sit near him. He made a motion with his hand, which, before seating herself, she humbly kissed.

The action mollified him. He drew her nearer to the couch, which was set cornerways to the French window with its low iron rail and outer ledge of stone, whereon lay the thick stem of the wistaria creeper. Round the window hung grape-like clusters of mauve bloom. The perfume of them filled Aïssé's nostrils, and with it, anew, that dreamy sensing of some unexplainable terror. Yet now the old man's demeanour did not justify her fear. She was too ignorant to be aware of the severe restraint he was putting upon himself. How should she suspect the carefully-thought-out attitude he had resolved to adopt? He had frightened her before: he would not frighten her again. If only the once strong will and the brain, so subtle in dealing with women, did not play him traitor! All the time his gaze was upon her, noting the fineness of her cloudy hair, the tender curves of her mouth, the creamy softness of her half-averted cheek. Then, observing that her neck was unadorned, he exclaimed sharply:

"Why have you not put on the chain? Do you despise my gifts?"

"It is that they are too fine for Aïssé," she answered deprecatingly.

"Nothing is too fine for Aïssé . . . no, not the half of my fortune if it were turned into jewels where-

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

with to deck her beauty. I would give it all—all, Aïssé, if I could make you love me as I desire to be loved."

"Indeed, sir, I—I—do love you," she faltered.

"*Par Dieu!* It is in a strange fashion that you show it," he cried. "You avoid me! you refuse my presents, you shrink at my touch. You are cold, ungrateful. Yes, you are ungrateful. I have loaded you with benefits and you will do nothing for me in return. It is because I am not the man I used to be—I have become old through illness. You find me ugly, cross-grained, unpleasing! But that will pass. I shall soon be myself again. And until then, the better opportunity to prove your gratitude and affection instead of failing me when I need you most."

Pierced by his reproaches, Aïssé lifted her eyes, swimming with tears, to the old man's face, and the manifest signs of illness in it increased her compunction.

She kissed his hand again, murmuring brokenly:

"Forgive me. . . . Oh, I did not mean—If my Aga could see into Aïssé's heart—"

"Ay, if I could read thy heart? Speak, Aïssé. Should I find there any spark of affection answering the love I bear thee?"

His eagerness made the girl shrink.

"Speak, Aïssé—speak. Thou art no babe: thou shouldst understand. Thou canst not fail me—now?"

"Oh, my Aga, if thou couldst read my heart thou wouldst know that my wish is never to fail thee."

"Art thou speaking truth, Aïssé?"

"In truth there is nothing I would not do to please my lord," she answered earnestly. "But it seems as though . . . I . . . I—" She stopped in confusion, not knowing how to phrase the uneasiness his look caused her. A child's frightened sob recalled to him his premeditated part.

"There, there! It is nothing to make thee cry, little one. Show thyself sweet and gentle to thy Aga,

The Wistaria

Aïssé, and he will teach thee tenderly how thou canst please him best. By Allah! thou needst be but thy own dear self to become all the joy and solace he asks of Fate."

As the Ambassador spoke his lean fingers stroked her curls, and their touch seemed to burn Aïssé through her hair to her skin. But she schooled herself bravely, asking him, with anxious gentleness, how she could wile away the weary hours of his confinement. She could play the harpsichord and sing a little, she said, and Monsieur Arouet de Voltaire had taught her to declaim portions of his *Henriade*.

The old man encouraged her to prattle on. Presently she described the spring glories of Ablon and Pont de Veyle, venturing to suggest that his health might improve better in the quiet of the country.

At this the Ambassador's ire rose again.

"*Mon Dieu!* You speak as if I were a cripple to be tended hand and foot, or an aged dotard to be humoured. I tell you that this is a mere passing indisposition, the result of a fever I took in the East. Soon I shall be hale and vigorous. I should be well now if I had that for which I long."

The girl's head drooped. He went on more calmly:

"Yet I cannot hide from myself that I am young no longer. As I said to thee, Aïssé, the sands run down in the hour-glass and I would drink of life's joys while yet I may. There is a poet of the East who phrases the thought aptly. These are his words." And the Ambassador recited in rapt and fervid tone:

*"Set the wine cup in my hand, for my heart is all afire
and life slips from me swift as quicksilver. Arise, my beloved,
For the favour of fortune is but a cheating dream. Arise,
for the flame of youth gushes like water from a spring that shall
ere long run dry."*

Aïssé had never known her guardian in this phase of himself. It awakened some faint racial vibration in her, and she gazed at him, wondering, moved by the

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

pathos and melody of his utterance. But suddenly the sense of fascination that was stealing over her suffered a sharp recoil. It was part of the man's sickness that his mood alternated between that of the despot and the suppliant. His voice, which had deepened in rhythmic cadence, now thickened to a harsh guttural. His eyes, with yellow glints in them, were like flames between the wrinkled lids. He stretched out his arms to her.

"Aïssé, *thou* shalt be to me the renewed fire of my youth: the sweet spring of my joy. . . . Only love me as I desire."

The girl started from her stool. A rush of crimson flooded her cheeks. She stumbled backwards and crouched, staring at him in shock and bewilderment.

"I do not know what you mean. How can I love you like that? . . . I have said that I feel for you the affection of a daughter—"

He interrupted her with a deep oath.

"I want no daughter. Cease playing the babe. You are old enough to understand that it is the love of the woman for the man—ay, for the husband—that I require. Wife, *à la main gauche—à la main droite*—it is no matter which. *That*, Aïssé, is what I ask from you."

Horried comprehension dawned in the girl's eyes. An older and astuter woman might have seized, to her advantage, the implied possibility of marriage—small likelihood as there was that the Ambassador had contemplated this. But the distinction meant nothing to Aïssé. Her slow mind only grasped the idea of a bond against which every fibre of her being revolted. She shook her head shudderingly.

"No, monsieur. Not *that*. . . . Oh, no—no."

The Ambassador's arms dropped to his sides.

"Then for what object, do you imagine, did I take you out of the hands of the *infidels* and have you reared at so great a cost? Was *that* nothing that I

The Wistaria

have heaped upon you luxuries which many a noble girl in France might envy? And now that I ask my just recompense, am I to be refused with scorn? . . . No, I do not *ask* ; I *claim*." His voice thundered, his look was terrifying.

The girl's gesture of helpless repulsion had stung his pride to the quick. "I do not ask," he cried, "I *demand* what is mine."

Aissé paled and stiffened.

"No, Monsieur, you cannot demand what it is impossible to give. The duty and the affection that I owe you are those of your niece—of your daughter—"

Her repetition of the phrases exasperated him.

"Enough. Never call yourself that again. You are not my daughter: you are not my niece. Now, you shall know *who* and *what* you are."

"I humbly request that Monsieur will enlighten me," Aissé returned with a simple dignity that sobered his rage.

"They have not told you anything? You have no remembrance of how you came to enter this house?"

"As Monsieur knows, it is but as the remembrance of a dream. And when I questioned *maman* as to the way in which I fell into the hands of the Infidels and my Aga delivered me from them, she bade me wait till it was his pleasure to inform me."

"Good! Well, it is my pleasure now to tell you—as I said—who and what you are. Surely, Aissé, you have had occasion to suspect that my brother and his wife were not your real parents?"

The girl bowed her head. "It is true, Monsieur, there have been such occasions. Will Monsieur inform me whose daughter I am?"

De Ferriol laughed roughly.

"That is more than I, or anybody else so far as I know, can say. It was rumoured that your father was a prince of Circassia and that he was killed and his

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

palace burned by robber-soldiers, who carried you away from the palace garden in which you were playing."

"A prince of Circassia!" Aïssé knew now why they called her "*la belle Circassienne*." The palace . . . the garden! Her eyes took a far-away expression. The dream-memories seemed to have gained substance and actuality. She reared her slender body with an air of unconscious pride.

"Then I am a princess?"

De Ferriol laughed again.

"On that point, *ma mie*, it is impossible to reassure you. The man who dubbed you 'princess' had sound financial reasons for so doing. So much for the question of *who* you are. Now I will tell you *what* you are."

He paused deliberately, while she gazed at him in tense silence.

"Since you were about three years old," he said, "you have been a slave."

"I—a slave!" she cried in indignant amazement. "What do you mean, Monsieur? The slave of whom?"

The Ambassador touched his breast. "Of Charles de Ferriol before you. You are *my* slave; I bought you in the slave-market at Constantinople. I paid a high price for you, Aïssé. But I have not grudged one crown of the many thousand first and last that I have spent upon you."

Aïssé stood for a minute as if petrified. Then she gave a shuddering moan, even as some small dumb creature mortally wounded and unable to comprehend or justify its hurts might have moaned.

"*Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!*" she murmured. "I—I a slave!"

He watched her, callous for the moment to her suffering, only anxious to see how far it affected his chances with her. She bent towards him, her poor little face quivering. "Monsieur, you must be mistaken. Such a thing could not be."

"On the contrary," he answered, "hundreds of

The Wistaria

women are sold to this day in that same market where I bought you. . . . My friend M. de Bautru-Nogent has one of them."

Still her eyes stared at him out of her white face, moaning softly.

"Why do you take it so ill?" he said testily. "Has it been such a terrible fate?"

She moaned, "A slave!"

"Have you any notion of the fate from which I saved you?" he returned sharply. "Do you know what happens to the most beautiful of those young girls who are bought in the slave-market?"

She shook her head.

"They are put into the harems of rich Turks," he continued, "and there, among many others, serve the pleasure of their masters. Would you have liked to be one among twenty or thirty odalisques?"

Again the look of horrified comprehension came into Aïssé's eyes. She had been taught at the convent about the Holy Wars. She had learned that Christian women then had often chosen death rather than become the slaves of Moslem captors. The words "harem" and "odalisque" had impressed themselves upon her mind as symbols of dreadful shame.

"It can't—it can't be true," she moaned.

"It is true," he retorted. "*Sacristi!* 'Tis time you were told the truth. Well, you know it now," he went on in a persistent iteration as though he wished to drum into her the fact that she was wholly in his power. "You know that you are a slave, that you have always in reality been a slave, and that many people have known this and have only kept it from you because it was my command. You know it, Aïssé."

Yes, she knew it now. The truth swept over her in a desolating wave of conviction. A thousand and one little incidents came back upon her, confirming his statement. That was the reason why the President

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

had never troubled himself about her, why her *maman* was so unloving; the reason, perhaps, why dear Madame de Villette had been kind to her; why my lord Bolingbroke had so often called her "*la chère Circassienne*." Now she understood why everyone seemed so interested and so amused about her wearing her Turkish dress! Oh, shame, shame! Only one thing she was certain of—d'Argental did not know. . . . Neither of her brothers knew. . . . But they were not her brothers! . . . The insistent voice went on dinning the truth into her ears.

"Yes, you are my slave, Aïssé. . . . Haidée was the name under which I bought you. . . . I paid fifteen hundred livres for you . . . a great sum for a babe! . . . A master who buys himself a slave can do what he pleases with her. If I liked to take you back to Constantinople I could put you into the market and sell you to the highest bidder, or I could have you sewn up in a sack and thrown into the Bosphorus for defying my wishes. . . . You belong to me . . . to me only—do you hear? No one else can ever possess you. You may never marry any man unless it be I, myself, who choose to marry you. You may never love any other man, because *I* have bought your love."

The goaded girl found voice at last.

"No, Monsieur, that you could not do. . . . You may buy a woman's liberty, but unless she gives it, you can never possess her love. And you have made me hate you—you whom I thought so good and so dear! But you are different from what I thought, and I detest you. *Voilà!* Kill me if you wish, since I am your slave. I do not care. Slaves have nothing to live for, and you have destroyed me here"—she pressed her bosom with a gesture that was infinitely pathetic. "But you cannot command my heart. Since I am your slave, I owe you no daughter's duty—and I have nothing else to give you."

She spoke at white heat of feeling. The finality

The Wistaria

of her words, the aversion from him, so clearly written on her face and in her manner, maddened the Ambassador's imperious temper beyond all power of control. In new fury he sprang at her as she stood, white, icily aloof, near the window. He gripped her neck with fingers like iron and raised the other hand as if to strike her. She thought that for certain he meant to kill her. A frantic prayer rose to her lips, "Jesus—mercy."

At that moment the voice of d'Argental, coming in through the open windows from the boys' lesson-room, sounded in Aissé's ears like the call of a rescuer. It was only that the youth, practising his fencing and having made a good thrust, cried loudly to Pont de Veyle in self-acclamation, but the sound brought a sense of succour to Aissé.

The Ambassador, too, heard, and was startled by the triumphant, boyish tones. The demoniac anger that had possessed him turned to an aguish trembling. The uplifted hand fell, merely brushing Aissé's cheek, though heavily enough to leave a scarlet patch upon it. He relaxed his grip of her shoulder and clutched the end of the sofa to steady his shaking limbs.

But Aissé scarcely noticed the change in him. At the voice of d'Argental there had shot through her an inspiration of deliverance. Her gaze went out beyond the low railing of the window and the nodding wistaria blooms. Outside blew God's wind of liberty. Beyond that window was d'Argental, and beyond was safety—the window—thirty feet or more from the paved terrace below—the narrow ledge—the wistaria-creeper. It might be death, but no matter.

Quick as a bird she darted over the rail. Clinging with her fingers, as best she could, to inequalities in the stone wall, she managed to catch at a straggling branch of wistaria. Her little feet were almost broader than the ledge which held them, but they were sustained in a fashion by the thick bole of the old creeper. Thus she made her perilous way along the garden front of the house.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

Restored by her action to sanity, the Ambassador rushed to the rail and strained over it.

"Come back, Aïssé," he called. . . . "Child, I meant thee no harm. . . . Come back, Aïssé."

But she had gained the nearest of two barred windows and was clinging to a rusty stave embedded in the stone-work.

Here a word, if the digression may be forgiven.

The moot point of Aïssé's relations with the Ambassador may not be passed over, since upon it hang all the threads of her after-life. It is the smudged bit of pattern in this piece of old French embroidery: the torn page in the script on which so many critics have disagreed, and which Messieurs Varenbergh, de la Porte and others, raking the de Ferriol correspondence, have filled up with a blot, not only upon the memory of Charles de Ferriol but upon that of Mademoiselle Aïssé. On the opposite side, the little biography of Aïssé, presumably by Mademoiselle Rieu, grand-daughter of her dearest friend, and annotated by Voltaire, bears the impress of truth. The judgment of Sainte Beuve—to name the most eminent of her defenders—speaks for itself, and, beyond all further testimony, there is that human document, her own letters. To the present chronicler the character of Mademoiselle Aïssé offers but one interpretation. Nevertheless, it is no easy task to restore the defaced outlines of that piece of embroidery in colours sufficiently accurate and yet delicate enough not to offend the purists of to-day. To portray accurately the manners of the eighteenth century is to procure condemnation of its morals. Therefore—to quote another of the commentators—let us beg a little indulgence for those old times: for the withered garlands, the faded pink pompons, the lingering perfume of wit and elegance which still embalm the irresponsible libertinage of the French Regency.

CHAPTER VIII

BROTHERS

" D'Orléans va bien s'amuser
Avec les maîtres à chanter
Et le grand œuvre il pourra faire
Lére, là, lanlére."

Pont de Veyle, his cushions in the same position, his big folio still upon his knee, was spouting from a slip of paper he had between the leaves of his book one of the pasquils of the day aimed at the frolics of the Palais Royal and the light loves of Philippe of Orléans, the future Regent. Pont de Veyle read, surreptitiously or otherwise, most of such writings of the period, many of which were certainly not literature for a boy. He had a pencil and note-book beside him, and paused now and then to jot down a phrase. Even at that age Pont de Veyle cultivated his talent for phrase-making and for the comedy of Society which later on became his *forte*. He recited with polish and an evident appreciation of the double meaning under the words which was quite lost on simple d'Argental, who having in the interim done an unprofitable spell at his lesson-book was again pursuing his one-sided fencing match with the clock-work dummy. The arms of the dummy went up and down with a jerk, and performed evolutions impossible to any martially-inclined human, but testing the boy's skill.

"Bravo!" cried d'Argental. "I wish thou wert man enough to take a hand at the sword with me."

"So I will," returned Pont de Veyle, "when thou hast learned the thrust and parry of a gentleman. Thy methods at present are more fitted for the stable-yard

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

than for the *salle des armes* where I practise fencing with men of my own quality."

Young d'Argental muttered something uncomplimentary to the quality, and began to re-wind the dummy. Pont de Veyle resumed his recitation, prefacing it by humming a popular refrain:

*"Ah que les hommes sont fous !
Dondon ! là ! là !
Lère ! là ! Lanlère, d'Orléans !
Quand la Séry le possédait,
Mieux des trois quarts il s'en valait.
Maintenant, il n'est bon qu'à faire
Lère ! là ! lanlère !"*

"Thou shouldst tell thy friend, the little ape Arouet—de Voltaire I suppose I should say since old Ninon de l'Enclos left him money wherewith to buy the 'de'—thou shouldst tell him, Charles, if he had a hand in this, to make his linesscan a little more harmoniously"

"Arouet! He had no hand in such scurilous stuff!" retorted d'Argental, indignantly.

"He would have had provided it won him favour and money," sneered Pont de Veyle. "H'st! What is that?"

His ear had been attracted by a moaning little call at the window.

"Charles! . . . Antoine! . . . A moi! . . . Aïssé!"

Both boys turned their heads and beheld the clinging form and pale, distracted face of their adopted sister.

"Aïssé!" they cried. "Grand Dieu! what has happened to thee?"

Pont de Veyle disencumbered himself of his cushions and rose to his feet. D'Argental was already at the window, wrenching out one of the iron bars, which was rusty with age, and which he had himself loosened a day or two before in view of the same feat which Aïssé had now accomplished, but which as yet he had not attempted.

Brothers

In a minute or two they had pulled her safely through the aperture.

Then, after the first wild exclamations, the boys stood dumb with amazement at the manner of her approach, and at her dishevelled and distressed appearance—the torn frock, the loosened sash, the disordered hair. Tears streamed down her cheeks, which, white with fear a few moments before, had now reddened to the hue of a crimson rose.

The girl was shaking in every limb and leant on d'Argental, who, moving his body excitedly from one foot to the other, roughly supported the shuddering little form.

"What is it? What hast thou been doing? Art mad to play such a trick? Why, even *I* did not venture it," cried the boy.

"Save me! Save me!" sobbed Aïssé.

D'Argental soothed her as best he could. Pont de Veyle stood and looked at them, his long, narrow chin poked forward, his long, dark blue eyes half closed, as he scrutinised Aïssé in a penetrating manner.

"Art thou mad," asked d'Argental again, "to do such a thing?"

The girl shuddered violently. "No, no, it is not *I* who am mad. It is he—*he* who"—she shook so that she could not finish her sentence.

"He! Whom meanest thou, Aïssé?"

She pointed her trembling finger in the direction of the Ambassador's apartment. "Thy uncle—*thy* uncle! He—"

"Our uncle!" exclaimed d'Argental. "Now thou *art* mad, Aïssé. If he was angry with thee there was no need to fly from him in that manner. Surely," added the boy, puzzled, "he did not beat thee? He could not have done that?"

Aïssé hid her face from Pont de Veyle's gaze. She clung to d'Argental. "Oh! I cannot tell thee. I do

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

not know how to tell thee. He has insulted me. He—"

"Insulted thee!" echoed d'Argental. "*Mon Dieu!* But how? Did he dare to lay hands on thee? I see thy dress is torn. Are these the marks of his fingers on thy skin?" And the boy pointed to the red blotches on the girl's soft white shoulder made by de Ferriol's frenzied clutch.

"He . . . Indeed, I think he meant to kill me," sobbed Aïssé.

"That is impossible," said Pont de Veyle, coldly: "and a gentleman who has been Ambassador for the King of France can scarce *insult thee*, Aïssé."

The faint inflection in his voice conveyed Pont de Veyle's subtle sense of difference between his uncle's position and that of the girl he had hitherto supposed to be his sister.

It came back to Aïssé afterwards, and made her wonder whether Pont de Veyle, so much in his mother's confidence, and precociously versed in the foibles of human nature, had any inkling of what she was really. At the moment, however, Aïssé's rather slow mind was unable to grasp anything except the one humiliating fact. "He was cruel to me," she said through her sobs.

"If that be so, I care not that he be our uncle, or Ambassador for the King of France, he shall answer to me for striking our sister," cried d'Argental in fury, his hand going to his sword.

• Pont de Veyle laughed cynically. Aïssé lifted her face from between her hands, in which she had hidden it, and gazed piteously at d'Argental.

"But I am not thy sister; he has told me that I am not."

She turned from the one boy to the other with heart-breaking passion. "Charles! Antoine! I am not thy little sister; I am but a stranger—a slave!"

Brothers

"A slave!" exclaimed both the boys; d'Argental incredulous, Pont de Veyle startled but convinced.

"There are no slaves in France," said d'Argental, hastily.

"No, but there are in Turkey, whence Aissé came," said Pont de Veyle. The boy went on hurriedly: "Our uncle, when Ambassador, once bought in Constantinople a beautiful Greek, whom he sent to Monsieur de Bautru-Nogent—it was Monsieur Biron I heard tell the story in our mother's *salon* the other day. He said that Monsieur de Bautru-Nogent declares he will marry his slave, and the Biron and the Lauzuns and the d'Aydies—they are all related, it seems—are mad at the disgrace on their house, and have petitioned for a *lettre de cachet* in order that Monsieur de Bautru-Nogent may cool his ardour in the Bastille. Tell me, Aissé, did my uncle say that he had bought thee likewise?"

"I will not believe it," put in d'Argental, hotly.

"It is true," said Aissé, sadly. "I was bought by thy uncle, he says, in the slave-market at Constantinople—I had then only three years and knew not what had come to me. They said I was a princess, and that robbers had slain my father and carried me away from the palace garden where I played. Oh! that palace garden! And the faces I remember as in a dream! But it was no dream. I am a slave." And she sobbed anew.

"If thou wert once a slave—thou art still as my sister," said d'Argental, his hands fingering his little sword. His face had stiffened with doubt and uncertainty, but Pont de Veyle's was alight with comprehension.

"And if thou wert a slave," continued d'Argental, fiercely, "then thou art a princess, and thy birth should claim thee protection."

"Yes—yes—but—" Aissé hid her face.

"The uncle has always hitherto been kind to thee," added d'Argental, angry and puzzled. "Why now

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

should he take to beating thee as if thou wert a disobedient lackey? "

" It was not—that he be—beat me," faltered Aïssé.

" What was it then? Speak, little one. In what has the uncle offended thee? "

Now the wound was too recent and too painful, and Aïssé was as yet too much of a child to be able to conceal it. In her distress she might even have confessed freely to d'Argental, but she shrank from the confident air of Pont de Veyle with its assumption of knowledge which her innocent mind was only beginning to comprehend, and from the forced revelation of which her whole being revolted. Behind her screening fingers she peeped at Pont de Veyle, the proud tears welling afresh, her hot face crimsoning. Yet his manner, as well as d'Argental's, compelled her speech.

" Monsieur told me—" she stammered and lowered her head before the keen gaze in the eyes of Pont de Veyle.

" What did he tell you—? Speak, Aïssé," said the elder boy.

" He told me—that he loved me."

" Ah! " Pont de Veyle stepped back and regarded the girl with a new and critical interest. Pont de Veyle understood.

Not so d'Argental. He was more puzzled than before.

" But what then, Aïssé—why be offended with the uncle for loving thee? Has he not always loved thee as much as a father? "

" It is not as a father that he loves me," sobbed the girl. " He does not desire me as a daughter—"

" *Ventre gris!* Then in what way does he desire thee? " cried d'Argental, impatiently, still obviously unenlightened.

Pont de Veyle uttered a more polished but contemptuous exclamation. Aïssé shook her head and

Brothers

moved miserably towards the door, her face buried in her handkerchief. D'Argental followed her, putting his arm around her in brotherly fashion.

"Nay, I see how it is. The uncle has injured thy tender spirit in telling thee thou wert sold as a slave. But console thyself, Aïssé. Thou canst never be less than our sister. We love thee, and we'll protect thee always just the same. Cease crying, little one. Go now to our mother; she will comfort thee. Meantime Antoine and I will see our uncle and put an end to this. I warrant that when he hears what we have to say he will offend thee no more."

"No, no, it is thou who dost not understand," cried poor Aïssé. "And I cannot go to thy mother; she is not *my* mother. Alas! for me there is no consolation, no protection save such as one may find with the Holy Mother."

Aïssé crossed herself devoutly and passed out of the room—a pathetic little figure. D'Argental gazed doubtfully after her, then turned and faced his brother. He was a fine-looking boy, broad and firmly built for his age, his head well set upon his shoulders, light brown hair cut square on the forehead and waving over his deep stitched linen collar. His frank eyes, just now full of pity, doubt and wonderment, were a rich hazel with fiery glints in them. They were large eyes, rather prominent, and not the least like the long almond-shaped deep blue eyes of Pont de Veyle which were de Tencin eyes. Pont de Veyle was staring at him with unconcealed astonishment and contempt.

"You will come with me to our uncle?" said d'Argental. "We must speak to him—you and I."

"Why?" returned Pont de Veyle, curtly.

"Why? Because our father is absent, and it is therefore for us, Aïssé's brothers—her adopted brothers, if you choose to put it so," seeing that Pont de Veyle made a slight negative motion with his head—"it is

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

for us, Antoine, to make the Ambassador see that he has treated Aïssé harshly. Though I marvel," added the boy, "how he could have the heart to be unkind towards one so gentle and sweet as our little sister. But let us go at once." D'Argental straightened himself and buckled on his little sword.

"You fool," said Pont de Veyle. "Can you not see that it is not for children to interfere in such a matter?"

"Call *yourself* a child and a skulk-behind-doors if you please," replied d'Argental. "As for me, I may be a boy in years, but I am my father's son and this is my father's house. No girl shall be made to weep in it by any man without my defending her."

"You fool!" said Pont de Veyle again. "I tell you that this is no occasion for children to interfere."

D'Argental's round eyes grew yet rounder. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Pont de Veyle shrugged and turned back to his books.

"I did well to call you a fool. Truly you are a child in understanding."

"I'd rather be a fool than a coward," rejoined d'Argental, stormily.

"Coward!" repeated Pont de Veyle, sharply. "Have a care, sir, or you may find that I, too, can use the sword."

"Nay, brothers do not fight like Court gallants," said d'Argental, more good-humouredly. "But, Antoine, surely thou must see that it is our duty to reason with M. l'Ambassadeur since Aïssé has complained of his unkindness."

"Methinks that instead of unkindness Monsieur may have intended greater kindness than Mademoiselle found to her taste," remarked Pont de Veyle, as he threw himself once more on the settee and settled the cushions to his liking.

Brothers

"*Parbleu!* If he intended kindness he took a strange way of showing it," said d'Argental. "Our uncle may have bought Aïssé for his slave, but in France that is no reason why he should beat her. Didst thou not notice the mark of his blow on Aïssé's neck?"

"Kisses may leave marks as well as blows," said Pont de Veyle, with marked emphasis.

D'Argental fell back, clutching the end of the table, as he eyed his brother in amazement and disgust. It was not likely that the boy should have reached his age, especially having many companions of different types, without gaining some notion of the grosser side of men's lives. But being a healthy lad he gave small scope to such ideas. Now for the first time an inkling of the truth dawned upon him, and it was almost as great a shock to d'Argental as it had been to Aïssé herself.

"*Sacré Nom!*" he gasped. "Thou canst not mean—"

"*Bête!* Thou art blind as a mole not to have seen what jumped to my eyes immediately Aïssé told her story. Our illustrious uncle—who, like other de Ferriols, has an eye to business—deems it time that he should claim interest on his money. *Voilà tout!* Doubtless he purchased this Circassian babe as an investment for his old age. When one has left youth and good looks far behind fair mistresses can only be bought at an exorbitant price."

D'Argental let fall a rude oath of the *canaille*—not of the aristocracy—which he had probably picked up in some stable-yard. The boy seldom swore; when he did, it was not after the manner of his elder brother, who had an airy way of apostrophising Fate in the jargon of the quality. D'Argental savoured more of the soil and used the commoner people's oburgations. Nevertheless, now he was shame-stricken as a woman. The blood rushed into his face. To this simple lad,

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

who revered his mother and would have been like to kill himself could he have known the gossip in their circle concerning her and d'Uxelles, and to whom his sister, as he had thought Aïssé, was as pure as a snowflake and to be tenderly cherished, there was something awful, and almost sacrilegious, in the suggestion of these designs of his uncle upon Aïssé.

"But it is an abomination! He—her second father! And never—until now that he makes his shameful proposal—to tell her that she is his bought slave! Oh, the poor little one! How cruelly she has been deceived."

"How kindly deceived!" corrected Pont de Veyle. "He has spared her during all these years the misery of realising her true situation."

"Only to slay her with the knowledge to-day," cried d'Argental. "Why should he have waited until she became a woman? What good has he gained by the delay?"

"You reason like an infant. See you not that this is Monsieur le Diplomat's great *coup*. He is as the general who makes an unpremeditated assault so that the citadel, unprepared, may fall without resistance or parley."

D'Argental flung out his hands in frantic abhorrence of the whole scheme. He strode down the room and back again, his boyish shoulders squared, his young face set in heroic resolve.

"The citadel shall not fall. It cannot be permitted—this traffic in human flesh."

"Who do you suppose will prevent it?" asked Pont de Veyle, with a shrug. He had re-arranged his cushions and seemed once more absorbed in the book on his knees, scarcely lifting his eyes when he addressed his brother.

D'Argental struck his chest melodramatically.

"I will prevent it—I, who speak—the child whom

Brothers

you taunt! I am man enough, my brother, to defend our sister's honour."

"You forget—the honour of a slave-girl."

"The honour of a princess!" stormed d'Argental.

Pont de Veyle nodded satirically.

"As for you—you do nothing!" said d'Argental.

"I demand—will you go with me and beard the Ambassador?"

"*Vrai Dieu!* Thy heroics are worthy of one of Monsieur Arouet de Voltaire's tragedies—"

"Bah! I ask again, wilt thou come?"

Pont de Veyle carefully put his forefinger upon the paragraph he was reading before he glanced up at his brother.

"No, I will not. I am not such an ass."

"*Ventre bleu!* If you were not my brother I would call you by a worse name," shouted d'Argental, and tramped from the room.

"One moment," Pont de Veyle called after him in gentler remonstrance. "I beg you, shut the door." At which d'Argental slammed it. Pont de Veyle removed his forefinger from the page, settled himself composedly, and resumed his studies.

D'Argental struck loudly with the hilt of his little sword upon the door of the ante-chamber to his uncle's apartment, and barely waiting for the voice from within to bid him enter, he flung the door open, raised the velvet curtains and stood unabashed in presence of His Majesty of France's late Ambassador to the Court of the Sultan of Turkey.

Not, it seemed at the first glance, a highly awe-inspiring personage. The Ambassador was alone and seated sideways on his couch, his long thin legs, in dark silk hose, stretched out before him, one lean hand clutching the carved edge of the sofa, while the other plucked nervously at the upholstered seat. His fine

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

old head was poked alertly forward on the rigid shoulders, the black eyes staring brightly, like those of some suspicious beast of prey, from under the thick grizzled eyebrows. Whatever he might have come to be, it was plain that in M. l'Ambassadeur intellect had once been paramount. But now the face was a curious grey hue, blotched in places with purple, the under-lip and chin dropping so that the tusk-like teeth were visible. The crisp, iron-grey hair, tied back with a black ribbon, was ruffled, which gave more prominence to the bald patches above the temples. To d'Argental he seemed a very old man, and at the thought of Aïssé being subjected to his jaded passions the boy felt like to choke with repugnance and shame.

There was no suggestion of shame, however, in the expression of the Ambassador. He eyed the boy steadily, a faint smile of amusement on his lips, this giving place to a look of haughty anger as d'Argental boldly confronted his uncle, for so filled was the boy with the purport of his visit that he forgot to make the customary reverence.

"To what am I indebted, young gentleman," exclaimed M. de Ferriol, "for the honour of this extremely brusque intrusion?"

The lad flushed, drew himself up and bowed in clumsy emulation of his brother's polished mode of salutation.

"I beg your Excellency's pardon for the brusqueness of my entry. My visit, however, can scarcely be unexpected since your Excellency's conscience must surely tell him why a member of this household is required by honour to—to—"

In his effort to maintain a courtly demeanour d'Argental halted for lack of a fitting phrase. The Ambassador broke in with crushing severity, his old eyes flashing fire like those of an offended lion.

"My conscience, sirrah, requires no prompting from

Brothers

an insolent brat. Explain yourself in less roundabout fashion."

"I will, Monsieur. I will speak plainly. You have insulted my sister Aïssé—my little defenceless sister—" The boy's voice broke.

The Ambassador raised his eyebrows and smiled again, not quite so satirically as before.

"Ah, I see. This is a young knight—rather let us say an unfledged cockerel trying his spurs in honour of the pretty cuckoo who has found her way into the family nest."

D'Argental made a step forward.

"Monsieur is pleased to add gibe to insult. But he will find that, young as I am, I can protect the helpless innocent."

"Against what? Against whom? By what right do you dare to arraign Mademoiselle Aïssé's lawful guardian and protector?"

"Your Excellency scarcely showed yourself a fine guardian when just now you forced your unwelcome attentions upon her," retorted the boy warmly, and without waiting for a reply he hurried on. "Monsieur, you ask me by what right I dare to arraign you? This is forced upon me, Monsieur. Aïssé came to us—my brother and me—at the peril of her life—all her feelings outraged—imploring us to save her from you. What else can I do? My father is absent, my brother—" D'Argental was obliged to swallow his disgust at the remembrance of Pont de Veyle's refusal.

"Your brother has a wiser head than you, bôÿ, although he may not have so warm a heart," said the Ambassador, with an unpleasant laugh. "Well, well, Monsieur Charles d'Argental! You seem a precocious cockerel. Since your sister—as you call her—confided to you her outraged feelings, no doubt she confided to you also that she is not your sister, and in that case our youthful Bayard may cherish for the young lady a

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

more ardent sentiment than befits a brother—a sentiment which accounts for this heroic balderdash.”

D'Argental's hand went again to his little sword.

“Monsieur, I am learning to fence, but I cannot fence in words. I'm a plain fellow, and Aïssé has ever been, and ever shall be, my dearly-loved sister. Her honour is dear to me as my own. Consequently, Monsieur, I ask for your promise that you will desist from your shameful importunities of my sister. Give me your word to that and I have no more to say.”

“Give *you* my word! Promise *you*!—a child who deserves whipping. *Mon Dieu*, I have a good mind to send for Bénédict and order him to thrash you.”

“He would have some difficulty, Monsieur,” returned d'Argental, hotly. “I know my faults, but they do not affect this matter. I beg again that you will regard Aïssé only as your daughter. I give an answer for her that she is ready to give you all that you could desire of a daughter's duty—or a slave's menial service,” added the free young Frank with a touch of scorn. “If *that* be what you require, and if it be really true that she who has been reared as my sister is your bought slave.”

The old man seemed unable to answer. His features were working; his head moved restlessly from side to side. When he spoke it was with a thick spluttering enunciation.

“Name of God! Why should it not be true? A de Ferriol does not lie.”

“No, Monsieur,” replied the boy, gravely acquiescent. “Then since this thing be true, and Aïssé is veritably in your power, I can only pray you to be generous. The little one was a babe when you bought her, without will or power of choice. Accord her now the liberty of a reasonable being, and let her feel that here, in this house where we have been children together, she is at least free from persecution.”

Brothers

"Persecution!" The Ambassador's bushy eyebrows lowered in a frown, but his better self was touched by the lad's sincerity.

"You call my affection for Aïssé by a hard name, my boy. Do you think there is nothing to be said on my side of the question? What have I not expended on Aïssé—in money and in hope for the future? Am I to have no recompense?"

"Surely, Monsieur, the tender care she would give you, the devotion of a daughter—"

The Ambassador checked him with a violent gesticulation. A change had come over the old man, his frown deepened, the contortion of his features was alarming. Had d'Argental been versed in the symptoms of his uncle's malady he would have known that something serious was impending. Naturally, however, the lad knew nothing of such illness, and with the impetuosity of youth was eager to press his advantage.

"Body of Satan!" cried the Ambassador. "I desire not a daughter's devotion from Aïssé. As for you, youngster, instead of prating insolent nonsense to your superior you would do the girl better service if you drummed into her head the advantages I offer her. Is it such a terrible fate to become the one ewe lamb of a master who would cherish her more tenderly than ever husband cherished his young wife?"

"Sir, you wish to marry Aïssé?" exclaimed the boy.

"*Morbleu!* Sir Galahad, you go too fast. A Count de Ferriol, the representative of his most Christian Majesty of France, does not marry a slave bought in an infidel market. Aïssé should be well pleased with her lot as my mistress, remembering that she would otherwise have been doomed to a Turk's harem."

D'Argental's eyes blazed with as fierce a light as those of his uncle. He, too, spluttered in his indignation.

"But it is an infamy—this which you intend.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

Mistress or wife—it matters not. It would be a crime were you to ally yourself to Aïssé. Holy Virgin!—spare her!”

Words failed the lad.

“And may I ask, Sir Champion, why it would be a crime were I indeed fool enough to offer Mademoiselle Aïssé honourable marriage?” asked the Ambassador, in withering sarcasm. His jeering tone goaded the lad into reckless language.

“Why, Monsieur? Because you are old—very old and ugly. Think you that any young girl could endure your embraces and not die of horror? Seek a spouse in the grave, but leave flowers of life like Aïssé to the care of the saints.”

Furiously angry the old man lurched to his feet, but his shaking limbs seemed unable to support him. He seized the head of the sofa with one hand, quivering hand, and shook the other clenched in d'Argental's face. At first he could only utter inarticulate oaths, then out came a torrent of speech—part Turkish, part in his own tongue; and that which the lad understood made him shrink back, and tore the veils from his fresh adolescence as the veils of Aïssé's maiden ignorance had been rent a little while before.

It was the stung egoism of the animal spitting venom. It was more than that. One might well have believed that the ancients were right in their theories and that this was diabolical possession.

In all ages the falling sickness has been superstitiously regarded. Great men, from Socrates, Julius Cæsar, Saul of Tarsus, Mahomet, Napoleon, have been credited with the malady. In case of some a supernatural endowment, in that of others, a curse. It is the opening of the door to angel or to devil—the vision upward of miraculous possibilities or the plunge downward into hell.

Count Charles de Ferriol had been warned that he

Brothers

was liable, under stress of excitement, to an epileptic seizure of the same nature as that which in Constantinople had for a time deprived him of his reason. He appeared now to have the consciousness that it was upon him. His speech turned into a succession of choking sounds, and he clutched at his throat as if to still the spasmodic jerking of his head. With an immense effort he contrived to say:

"Go . . . go. I am ill . . . suffocating. Call Benoît."

The boy rushed to the bell, but, as he pulled it, there came a loud, strange scream, unlike ordinary human utterance, and the sound of a fall. D'Argental averted his eyes involuntarily, for the sight of his uncle was too horrible. De Ferriol's body was bent in uncontrollable convulsions, the eyes rolled wildly, the teeth gnashed together, bloody foam surrounded the mouth.

Benoît came running in and knelt down beside his master.

"What is it? What is it?" cried d'Argental.

"It is a fit," said the man. "I feared this. What have you been doing, Monsieur d'Argental, to bring it on—or Mademoiselle? Was it her fault? I had cautioned her."

"It was his own fault, not mine nor Mademoiselle Aissé's," returned d'Argental, resentful of the suggestion, yet greatly alarmed and remorseful. "You must not blame Mademoiselle Aissé."

Benoît nodded with pursed lips as though he understood. He was busy unloosening his cravat and doing what he could for the unconscious man.

"Shall I send for the doctor?" whispered d'Argental.

"Yes, do, Monsieur. Send Jean or François at once for the doctor, though there is little he can do. Stay, but help me first a moment." And Benoît, lifting the Ambassador's head, made the shrinking boy take his feet, and together they straightened his limbs

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

out on the floor, where he lay breathing stertorously, but no longer twisted by the horrible convulsions.

"Will he die?" murmured the boy.

"Alas! no, Monsieur. Not at present—at least as men die. For him, poor gentleman! there is the greater death in life." Bénait lowered his voice, though he knew there was no power of hearing in the recumbent form. "The doctor has told me what to expect if this should come again," he said. "Ah! Monsieur d'Argental, the hand of God has descended heavily upon my poor master, cutting short his prosperity and his hopes."

"God knows best," said d'Argental, briefly, but in the boy's heart there was considerable relief on Aïssé's behalf at this timely intervention of divine Providence.

CHAPTER IX

DEATH IN LIFE

ALL was confusion in the household after the Ambassador's seizure, until indeed, his physicians had him removed from the Hôtel de Ferriol. But this was not for some little while.

The same result followed the fit as in the case of previous attacks at Constantinople.

The Ambassador's ravings penetrated to the boys' lesson-room, which had to be vacated by them, and the indistinct sound of his voice sometimes reached Aïssé's chamber overhead.

It was thought well that the lads should go with their tutors and continue their studies at Ablon. But thither Aïssé was not permitted to accompany them. She was in terrible disgrace. Poor Aïssé! Garbled versions of the affair with the Ambassador were afloat—purposely garbled, for Madame de Ferriol had a very proper respect for the conventions and always desired to present a decent front to the world. Therefore she tried to keep down scandal in connection with her brother-in-law, and preferred it should be thought that Mademoiselle Aïssé had been foolish rather than that the Ambassador had been to blame.

Hysterical misinterpretation of her guardian's amiable intentions towards her on the girl's part, and impetuous and ill-judged championship on that of the boy d'Argental, were put down as the causes of M. le Comte de Ferriol's illness. Président Augustin, hastily summoned from Metz, was given this version of the occurrence, and prompted by his wife, who wished to

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

disclaim responsibility, condemned Aïssé to confinement in her room, save when she took her necessary exercise out of doors. She was forbidden to communicate with d'Argental or Pont de Veyle, and was made to feel herself, generally, a pariah. Madame de Ferriol scarcely spoke to her until one day Aïssé was summoned to the orange boudoir and a momentous interview took place between them.

There is no need to go closely into the particulars of that interview. Speaking broadly, Madame de Ferriol confirmed all that the Ambassador had told Aïssé concerning her position as his slave. Thereupon the elder woman frankly advised the younger to yield to circumstances and consent to the addresses of her master, should he recover sufficiently from his illness to renew them.

Aïssé could never speak to anyone of that conversation with Madame de Ferriol. It left a mark that was ineffaceable. Had she not already been informed that she was no child of Madame de Ferriol's Aïssé must now have fully realised the fact.

Not alone did Madame de Ferriol's want of maternal sympathy and her willingness to barter the girl whom she had reared prove that she could not have been Aïssé's mother, but she showed traits of character which told the girl unmistakably that not to Madame de Ferriol might she ever look for the womanly counsel she so much needed. She was alone. And alone, unaided, must guard herself against that peril, the nature of which had now been made clear to her.

At present, however, it appeared doubtful how far the Ambassador would recover his faculties of mind and body, and Aïssé saw plainly enough that both the Président and his wife were in considerable anxiety as to the financial effect upon themselves of any change in their family arrangements. This, combined with the curiously low moral tone of the day (as it must appear

Death in Life

to us), may be regarded as some excuse for Madame de Ferriol, and the poor child, amid all her pain and disillusionment, tried so to regard it.

When Aissé left Madame de Ferriol's presence she had ceased to be a child. Nevertheless, her heart clung to her childish ideal of Charles de Ferriol, and she persisted in telling herself that it was the disorder of the brain that had caused the change in her deliverer. While the Ambassador was ill in the Hôtel de Ferriol she went through agonies of remorse and anxiety. It was too awful to think that, indirectly, she had been the cause of this later illness—she who owed him still undying gratitude. Since she could get from no one else satisfactory accounts of his condition, she used sometimes to waylay the doctor and beg for information about his patient.

He was a middle-aged man—the doctor, broad and squat, wearing his own straight, greyish hair, and always dressed in black, even to the waistcoat, that had just a little embroidery upon its flaps, with ruffles of plain white linen, metal buckles to his shoes, and stockings of finely-woven wool. His face was rough featured, with a beaked nose and firm, clean-shaven upper lip, but it was a shrewd and kindly countenance. He was clever too, and honest in his way, for while nervously anxious to keep the favour of his distinguished clients—the de Tencins, de Ferriols and their set—he had told his august patient the truth, and while he talked guarded commonplaces to Aissé was nevertheless perfectly aware of what had happened.

The best way out of the difficulty, he thought, was to get the Ambassador away from irritating influences, and this was accordingly done. Nevertheless things did not go much better for Aissé, and her life was as lonely and miserable as before. When Madame de Ferriol went, during the early summer heats, to Ablon Aissé was left behind in Paris.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aissé

She learned during that time that the Ambassador had recovered his reason and was progressing towards his former state of health. Also that he had gone, in charge of the doctor, to the home of his boyhood, Pont de Veyle, where it was hoped the good air and the quietude would greatly benefit him.

All this Aissé learned by degrees from the doctor, who, when his patient was well on the mend, came to and fro many times. There had been some talk of the boys going to Pont de Veyle, for the first heats in Paris were followed that year by heavy rains, which flooded the banks of the Seine, and Ablon being low-lying Madame de Ferriol did not consider its damp position suited to the delicate constitution of her eldest darling. But it was feared that the sight of d'Argental might recall the late agitating incident and have a bad effect upon the Ambassador. Poor Aissé felt acutely her misdeemeanour in having deprived her adopted brothers of their usual pleasant sojourn in the country. Not that the lads themselves reproached her. Pont de Veyle for many reasons preferred being in Paris, and d'Argental, whatever his disappointment, was far too generous to let anyone be blamed but himself. In those troublous days he stood nobly by Aissé and would allow no one in his presence to say a word against her. In truth, the poor child would have been badly off had it not been for d'Argental's loyal friendship. Though life at the hôtel had gone back to its ordinary course, and Madame received her circle as before, she never now desired Aissé's presence in the *salon*, and the girl was not for an hour allowed to forget that she was in disgrace.

Pont de Veyle held himself aloof from domestic complications, and took small notice of his adopted sister, while his mother seized every opportunity for keeping the boys and Aissé apart, till, for lack of other interests, the girl prayed that she might resume her daily classes at the convent.

Death in Life

This was permitted her. For the rest, she led a very secluded existence, during the heat thirsting like a parched flower for the garden at Ablon, and revelling in its green beauty on the one or two occasions when Madame de Ferriol allowed her to visit the "*guinguette*."

As time went on Madame's frigid discipline relaxed little. This was due to letters received from the Ambassador at Pont de Veyle—letters testifying to the restoration of his mental capacity, in which he desired that Aïssé should not be coerced or punished, but should be allowed to do as she pleased. He had no wish that she should suffer on his account, he said. Evidently he relied on her sense of gratitude and natural docility for the ultimate furtherance of his desires. But neither her Aga nor Madame de Ferriol understood Aïssé, nor knew the determination of character that lay beneath the girl's yielding exterior. Nor did they realise how much she suffered. There was one advantage in this, however. Her sensitive nature, thrust back upon itself, acquired a certain dignified reserve and self-reliance which was in later trials to stand Aïssé in good stead.

Now, hearing no more of her lord and master's intentions, Aïssé began to hope that the nightmare terror was really no more than a nightmare, and that by-and-by she should find him as she had known him heretofore. She was encouraged in this hope by learning that the Ambassador had written to Madame de Ferriol begging that his nephews should not be debarred from their summer stay at Pont de Veyle. Therefore the boys were sent thither, d'Argental armed with special instructions from his mother not to place himself without direct invitation in the way of his uncle, who was still confined entirely to one part of the château.

It was a surprise when Monsieur de Ferriol sent for his younger nephew very shortly after the boy's arrival, and d'Argental, who did not know what to make of the

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

summons, obeyed it with not too good a grace. No doubt the boy felt a sense of guilt when he saw how weak and changed the old man had become, and this added to his awkwardness and gave him a surly, defiant air, which seemed to imply that though he was sorry for what had happened he resented being called to account for his share in it.

He knew not how to comport himself when his uncle greeted him in half-satiric jest.

"How now, Sir Knight Errant, gallant champion of distressed damsels? There is no need to scowl at a fallen foe. You had the best of it, boy, in that last encounter."

The lad set his lips doggedly, though he did not like meeting the old gentleman's eyes, which were more conciliatory than he had expected. He cast his own uneasily from right to left as if he would have been glad to sidle out of the great bed-chamber. It was a big, panelled, tapestried room, in which King Henry of Navarre had once slept. A huge fourpost bed, surmounted by armorial carvings, was set in an alcove, and there were three windows looking out over the fertile valley of the river Veyle and the terraced garden of the château. The Ambassador's couch was drawn up near one of these, so that as he reclined he could command the prospect.

D'Argental put on a manly front and made a stiff salutation.

"M. l'Ambassadeur is pleased to ridicule what was meant in good earnest," he said surlily. "If Monsieur only sent for me to gibe at my knight-errantry, as he calls it, I would crave his permission to retire."

The Ambassador laughed.

"Tut, tut! Still a little bombastic windbag, I see. No—" as d'Argental took a step backward. "Come here, nephew, I did not send for you to quarrel." And when the youth reluctantly drew nearer the

Death in Life

couch M. de Ferriol leaned forward and held out his hand.

"Shake hands, boy," he said kindly.

Then d'Argental did a bold, ungracious thing, which should have earned him chastisement. He looked straight at his uncle, his head up, his cheeks flushed, and deliberately put his hands behind his back.

"M. l'Ambassadeur forgets that he did not give me his word to desist from persecuting Mademoiselle Aissé."

The Ambassador sharply drew back his hand, clenching it so that the veins knotted between the bony fingers. For a second the old lion flashed in his eyes. He seemed as if he would have jumped from the couch to annihilate his nephew, but his useless limbs held him bound. His struggle was pathetic.

The boy had not realised his uncle's helplessness. He gave an involuntary murmur of contrition, and the sight of his evident distress softened the old man, whose face changed, and he laughed again, this time rather sadly.

"*Mordieu*! young sir, you have me at a disadvantage. The more reason to behave like a gentleman instead of an ill-bred lout. Time was when you would have made a quick shrift for your insolence," and I have a good mind to get you a taste of the Bastille, which may teach you to respect your elders."

"I meant no disrespect, sir, but—"

"But it appears that you came with the intention of making me your enemy; and in sooth I am more inclined to be your friend. Thou art an unlicked cub, d'Argental, for all thy play at knight-errantry, but thou hast sound stuff in thee—honest, brave de Ferriol stuff—better than the smooth priestcraft of the de Tencins. There's something in thee, boy, that reminds me of what I was at thy age—when I made up my mind

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

to go soldiering—ay, and I did—and got myself a good record in the wars.”

The boy looked at his uncle, puzzled and touched in spite of himself. He moved his lips to speak, but thought better of it.

“Thou didst ask me for a promise, d’Argental,” continued the Ambassador, “and thou mightest have known that I—a much older Charles de Ferriol than thou—do not pledge myself at the bidding of a child—or of any man either, for that matter. Notwithstanding, I have done grace to thy sincerity by thinking over what thou hast said. Now; listen. I choose to go my own way to the winning of Aïssé. If I win her and make her happy—as I give you my word she shall be—then the means I may employ are of small matter to thee or to the rest of the world. If not—*eh bien!*” and he quoted softly, half to himself:

*“Plus inconstant que l’onde et le nuage,
Le temps s’enfuit, pourquoi le regretter,
Malgré sa pente volage
Qui le force à nous quitter,
C’est être sage d’en profiter.
Goûtons-en les douceurs,
Et si la vie est un passage,
Au moins, semons-y des fleurs.”*

As he spoke, the old man, in pitiful bravado, threw his arms apart and shrugged with the daring insouciance of an epicurean of the day. D’Argental remembered having seen Voltaire’s godfather, M. l’Abbé de Châteauneuf, make just such a gesture once when young Arouet had taken him to the *salon* of old Ninon de l’Enclos and he had seen there some of the atheistic wits of the coterie of the Temple.

“No, enough,” said the Ambassador, as d’Argental began a hasty protest. “There are limits to my forbearance and thou hast almost overstepped them, nephew. Later on thou mayst come again if thou wilt

Death in Life

and tell me how many trout thou hast caught in the Veyle and what is the spoil of thy blunderbuss. But continue to play the *preux chevalier*, boy, it will do thee no harm, and at least I shall know that in thy keeping Aïssé is safe from other insults than mine own."

He laughed again, and again d'Argental stammered incoherently, not knowing how to answer him.

Monsieur de Ferriol checked him anew.

"Go now, boy," he said. "I am not strong and cannot talk much at a time. Since thou wilt not embrace me, depart."

For an instant d'Argental hesitated. Custom required that he should kiss his uncle's hand. He made a slight movement towards the old gentleman, then drew back with a jerk, making a quick low bow and retired. Monsieur de Ferriol watched with an amused, irritated, yet comprehending expression as the lad went out of the room.

When d'Argental, on his return, told Aïssé of that interview she wept in pity and compunction. But she felt happier notwithstanding, for this seemed more like her Aga of the past.

But by one of those freakish revulsions which at this time came upon him, the Ambassador's softer mood soon changed to one of violence, and it was as though the evil spirit had entered into him again. Then there fell upon Aïssé a blow the like of which she had never anticipated. This was a mandate, couched in the imperious manner of a slave-owner and addressed to his sister-in-law, ordering that Aïssé—his property—should be forthwith despatched at once to him at Château Pont de Veyle.

With the mandate came also a letter to Mademoiselle Aïssé herself.

It was that letter, published in 1828 by M. de la Porte, of which the authenticity has been a subject of dis-

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

cussion among Mademoiselle Aïssé's biographers. Alas! to the shame of Count Charles de Ferriol, there can be little doubt that the letter is genuine.

Here it is in its old-world French, as M. de la Porte gave it out:

" Lorsque je vous retiray des mains des infidelles et que je vous acheptay, mon intention n'estoit pas de me preparer des chagrins, et de me rendre malheureux: au contraire, je prétendis profiter de la decision du destin sur le sort des hommes pour disposer de vous à ma volonté, et pour en faire un jour ma fille ou ma maitresse. Le mesme destin veut que vous soiez l'une et l'autre, ne m'estant pas possible de séparer l'amour de l'amitié, et des desirs ardents d'une tendresse de père: et tranquille, conformés-vous au destin, et ne séparés pas ce qu'il semble que le Ciel ayt pris plaisir de joind. e.

" Vous auries esté la maistresse d'un Turc qui aurait peut estre partagé sa tendresse avec vingt autres, et je vous aime uniquement, au point que je veux que tout soit commun entre nous, et que vous disposiés de ce que j'ay comme moy mesme.

" Sur toutes choses plus de brouilleries, observés vous et ne donnés aux mauvaises langues aucune prise sur vous, soyés aussy un peu circonspecte sur le choix de vos amyes, et ne vous livrés à elles que de bonne sorte, et quand je seray content, vous trouverez en moy ce que vous ne trouveriés en nul autre, les nœuds à part qui vous lient indissolublement.

" Je t'embrasse, ma chère Aïssé, de tout mon cœur."

Commotion reigned now at the Hôtel de Ferriol. Madame de Ferriol herself was shocked and perturbed, for above all things she desired to present a commendable attitude to the world. She dared not disobey her brother-in-law; it mattered so much to Président Augustin and his wife that the Ambassador should

Death in Life

continue to subsidise the establishment. Trouble was brewing in the financier's affairs. The King's funds had filtered too freely through Président de Ferriol's fingers. As has been said, a few years later, accounts were called for and restitution had to be made; and though the Chamber of Inquiry had not yet been instituted, clouds were gathering, and there was always the chance of one bursting and wrecking the present prosperity of the house in the Rue Neuve St Augustin.

Small wonder that Monsieur le Président thought of little but the money game and the stimulation of his jaded energies at the dinner-table. Small wonder that Madame la Présidente intrigued with her brother to propitiate the powers that might be, so that she might provide shelter for an evil day, and perhaps pull a few plums for herself and her family out of the political pudding which her friends d'Uxelles, Bolingbroke, de Torcy and the rest were busy mixing.

And she had her own affair of the heart to worry her. It was not easy to maintain her ascendancy over the Maréchal, for if habit seemed to have almost legitimatised the bond, it had in a measure depoeticised it—on the man's side at least.

Let Madame de Ferriol be given her due. In that age of corrupt women she was rather better than the others. She shines beside her sister, the nun. At least she had the merit of fidelity to her one grand passion. But no! there were two. The second was her sons—notably the eldest one. She was always torn between these conflicting emotions. Everything depended upon the keeping up of appearances at the Hôtel de Ferriol—upon having money wherewith to do this—upon the continuance of her brother-in-law's stay as a "paying guest." It angered her that the little prude, Aissé—as she considered the girl—should set herself up as an example of morals and overthrow the apple-cart Madame had been so laboriously trundling.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

Aïssé must be taught her world. Aïssé must learn that a beautiful woman without fortune should take the obvious means of enriching herself and of making things easy for those who had brought her up. When worldly maxims failed and scolding had no effect, Madame tried softer means. She appealed to Aïssé's affection; she implored Aïssé's sympathy. The matron humbled herself before the maiden and cited her own case as a model. New shocks assailed the temple of poor Aïssé's innocence. Everywhere was disillusionment, horror, shame. There were no veils left to hide the ugly deceptions amid which, all unsullied, she had lived.

Yet Aïssé pitied Madame de Ferriol—pitied her because the elder woman had heart and conscience enough to suffer; pitied her for being what she was; pitied her for her unworthiness to be d'Argental's mother.

Madame de Ferriol had said too much; she repented her confidences and tried to recover her ground when she saw that her appeal was useless. Aïssé shudderingly refused to do what was asked of her. Madame stormed, threatened. The steward from Pont de Veyle was waiting to take the slave to her Sultan. Aïssé must go at once. But Aïssé would not. She would die first.

She kneeled at the feet of Madame de Ferriol. Only let her be allowed to remain in the convent? No, that was impossible. Aïssé threatened in her turn. She would fly to Marcilly to Madame de Villette. . . . But Marcilly was a long way off. And then another shock. . . . Madame de Ferriol sneered at the virtue of Madame de Villette. What about the roses of Ablon and my lord Bolingbroke? Here was the last veil rent!

But the latent capacity for pure passion in Aïssé—again, maybe a foreshadowing—rose in defence of her

Death in Life

dear Marquise. Purity recognises inherent purity, and the devotion of Marie-Claire de Villette for Harry St John was a very different thing after all from this shameless bondage.

There was no help to be gained, however. Aïssé must aid herself. Well, then, let them bind and gag and carry her off to the château. She would starve herself, or she could fling her body from an upper window of the château and be dashed to pieces against the stones. Better that than the worse fate. Or the little stream of the Veyle, which meandered through the valley was deep enough to drown her. Her obstinacy gained her respite. She was locked up in her chamber and told that she must write to her master and plead her own cause.

There is no record of Aïssé's letter to Charles de Ferriol, but one may well believe that it was as if written in her heart's blood. The steward went back to Pont de Veyle with it, and with one likewise from Madame to her brother-in-law. Aïssé was kept strictly imprisoned until the courier's return. Then, one day, she was summoned to Madame de Ferriol's presence and descended, a wan ghost, by the little dark stairway to receive her sentence.

But again a higher tribunal had intervened.

Madame de Ferriol met her with a storm of reproaches. She had killed her benefactor! The Ambassador had had another seizure and was like to die.

Madame set off, posting herself, in all haste for Pont de Veyle. No thought now of keeping Aïssé a prisoner. She was liberated, and waited in deep sorrow for news. The boys had recently returned from a visit to Ablon and d'Argental was her consoler. Through him she learned what had happened, for Madame de Ferriol held no communication with the cause—as she considered—of all the ill.

The Ambassador's fit had been a serious one, but

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

happily there had been no recurrence of the former temporary mania. He was not violent, and he still had his reasoning faculties, though they were in a weak condition. But he had lost the power of his lower limbs. He had retained some use of his hands, and, in a measure, the power of speech. His physicians predicted that in this respect he would improve. From the middle down, however, he was now completely paralysed. That death in life of which he had been warned was come upon him.

Some weeks passed. Président Augustin, who had been summoned also to his brother's bedside, was again at home. By-and-by, Madame de Ferriol returned likewise. She could do no good, she said, and her children needed her. The truth was that her heart was far from Pont de Veyle.

Bénoit attended to his master, who lay like a log in the great carved bed in his room at the château. Would he ever rise from it again? Charles de Ferriol was now alone. All the pomp and circumstance that had formerly attended him as Ambassador had melted away. He was merely a private gentleman in the home of his boyhood, which he had left as the unconsidered younger son with his way to make in the world. Only then he had not slept in the state-chamber which was allotted to him now. He had servants, of course, and his doctor, but otherwise there was no one but the village curé to speak to, and the curé thought it his duty to point out to His Excellency the road to heaven. His Excellency—by special grace of Madame de Maintenon and the old king permitted to retain his titles and privileges as Envoy in abeyance of his Most Sacred and Christian Majesty—seemed to find some cynical diversion in shocking this simple priest with stories of Eastern profligacy and in extolling the Creed of Islam and drawing vivid pictures of the sensuous joys of a good Mussulman's paradise.

Death in Life

En revanche the curé would give realistic details of the pains of purgatory and the torments of hell; and bringing forth bell, book and candle, he would exhort the sick man and sinner to repent and be shriven of his misdeeds. And so they would fight the duel of Fatalism and Salvation by faith and works—Kismet against Election by Grace—until Monsieur de Ferriol snapped wearily and the priest was bidden to reserve his sermon for another day. And then for hours the old man who had sunned himself in life's meridian and had watched the shadows lengthen and the evening draw on, would gird and gloom in silence and gnash his teeth in vain regrets and impotent rage. And in those dreary reveries he would call up again the gorgeous procession of his departed Oriental loves and yearn after that pale, lily-like, living love which now and for ever was denied him.

The summer had passed, and autumn had come. The woods of Pont de Veyle were yellow, the grapes hung fit for the gathering, and the wine presses and the vats were got ready for fermenting the grape-juice. But nothing could rouse the Ambassador from his dull stupor of decay. If only one could interest him, the doctor said, only find something for which he cared enough to desire to live, he might recover sufficient strength to undertake the journey by slow stages back into the more stimulating atmosphere of Paris. But there appeared little hope of that, for in the heart of the cynical old potentate every desire seemed dead. The doctor questioned him. Was there nothing that he wished for? No one whom he would like to have with him? Friends? No. His brother or his sister-in-law? No. His nephews? Or—the Paris doctor, who spoke, hesitated—Mademoiselle Aïssé?

A flash of the eye! A faint, acquiescent movement of the head. The feeble hands signed for writing materials, but the feeble, weak fingers had no power to

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

hold the pen. Benoît was bidden to write at his master's dictation.

It was the Ambassador's pleasure, he wrote, that Mademoiselle Aïssé should come to Pont de Veyle. But in how different a manner from before was the demand now made. This was the request of a suppliant rather than the mandate of one who must be obeyed. Count Charles de Ferriol craved the presence of his adopted daughter—that was how Benoît was bidden to write. Monsieur begged that Mademoiselle Aïssé would of her kindness make the journey and tend him in his sickness with that filial care she had once expressed her willingness to give. He desired that she should be accompanied by her brother, M. Charles d'Argental, who would be responsible for her comfort and well-being.

Madame de Ferriol made the arrangements for the journey, the Président as usual not interfering—and d'Argental and Aïssé, with their people, duly arrived at Pont de Veyle.

Once again the girl found herself standing before the door of her Aga's chamber. This time d'Argental brought her thither.

"Do not fear, Aïssé," the boy whispered. "He cannot harm thee now."

It was the Paris doctor himself—whom Aïssé knew—who opened the door and drew the girl in. He said, "She must enter alone. His Excellency cannot bear much yet."

So d'Argental was waved back.

The afternoon sun shone in at one of the windows of the great panelled room. The wind shook the falling leaves in a row of elm trees outside, and the rooks were chattering in their branches. Otherwise there was a stillness in the chamber like that of death.

A sun-gleam dazzled Aïssé's eyes for a moment or two, and she stood bewildered, bathed in the glow, her

Death in Life

white dress seeming to the watcher in the bed to shine like a saint's garment, her sweet face, soft with pity, transfigured also. To the eyes of that Death in Life which watched her she might have been an angel coming to deliver a soul in prison.

The doctor pointed to the alcove and departed into the adjacent dressing-room. Then Aïssé became aware of the gaunt form lying as one dead in the great bed hung with faded tapestry curtains and with its heavy armorial carvings overhead. An embroidered counterpane was stretched over the rigid limbs, the arms extended straight on either side of him, the hands beneath the coverlet. The upper part of the body was dressed in a silken Turkish robe; a Turkish fez hid the baldness which had increased of late. Against the dim background of shadowed tapestry showed the grey emaciated face, and out of their cavernous sockets gleamed the eyes—sepulchral lamps in which burned all that was left of the flame of life.

Aïssé stepped towards the bed, soft-footed, very gentle, her eyes full of wistful tenderness.

There was silence as the two looked at each other—the pure young girl and the wreck of an old man, who through all the evil of his past days had yet ever had in him much of good. And in that look all fear, all repulsion and all bitterness melted away, and Aïssé knew that her Aga loved her still, but with a love from which the coarser element had been purged.

She noticed a faint, struggling movement beneath the counterpane. He was trying to draw forth his poor, weak arms—all that still answered to the active brain. The girl understood, and slipping back the coverlet, placed her cool, firm young hands in his hot, dry palms. His thin fingers feebly grasped hers and drew her down, his eyes never leaving her face as she bent over him.

“My daughter!”

All the old affection, and something of the old

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

worship welled anew in the girl's heart. She bent lower—lower—till her lips were on his forehead.

“ My father! my more than father! ” she whispered, and kissed him solemnly.

That kiss registered the dedication of Aïssé's after life to Charles de Ferriol's service. She remained his daughter in very truth; dutiful, affectionate, assiduous, and he was her kindest, truest friend until the day of his death.

BOOK II.—THE REGENT

CHAPTER I

THE PUPPETS PASS

FROM this time forward there came a great change in the conditions of Mademoiselle Aissé's life.

The change was gradual, and she scarcely realised what a difference the Ambassador's acknowledged adoption of her as his daughter was to make in her future until in the following year she went back with him to Paris.

But even here, in her narrowed existence at Pont de Veyle, the relief from the strain, and the calm that followed it, were so delightful that she dated a new era from that first sight of Monsieur de Ferriol moveless and almost speechless in his dim alcove. Most wholeheartedly did she fulfil her new vocation as a daughter, sitting hour after hour by his bed or sofa, reading to him, playing on a spinet that she had brought up from the *salon*, devising games to amuse him, writing letters for him, and, in fact, doing everything that was possible to make the dreary days pass less heavily. The autumn sports in the woods, the crisp winter sunshine, called to her in vain; she would never leave her Aga. The country neighbours who came to pay their respects to the Ambassador gave up inviting her to their houses. There was absolutely no reserve in her devotion.

And she had her reward. Month by month, during the severe but bright winter, the old man got slowly better. In respect of the paralysis of his lower limbs

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

there could be no amelioration, but he regained the use of his hands, and his brain, except on the occasions of his periodic attacks, kept alert and clear. Irritable he was often; it would have been strange otherwise. But he seldom vented his ill-humour on Aïssé. The mood in him which she found most painful was one of sardonic gloom, when he would lie for long stretches silent and motionless, a strange smile on his lips, his eyes staring fixedly, a dull fire burning in their sombre depths. She could do nothing then but play and sing softly, and, after the manner of David with Saul, try thus to drive the evil spirit out of him.

It was not a cheerful existence for a young girl, but Aïssé's was a nature pre-eminently suited for self-sacrifice. She did not, indeed, consider it sacrifice. Looking back long afterwards upon this winter at Pont de Veyle it seemed one of the most comforting and satisfactory she had ever known.

The château was a large, square block of grey stone mellowed and lichenous from age, with a low tower, which, from one point of view, resembled a huge bastion, for its walls came down sheer, much below the level of the house, and partly supported the paved terrace with sloping grass banks that ran along the front of the dwelling.

The rooms were big, compared with those of the hôtel in Paris. Many of them opened one into the other, and most of them were panelled in oak, and had carved wooden door frames and heavy cornices. The broad terrace was approached by flights of stone steps, and there was a good deal of garden laid out stiffly, with clipped hedges and formal borders. The place had an air of feudal grandeur—or rather would have had if it were not so inadequately kept up. Nevertheless, Madame de Ferriol grumbled sorely at the money spent here, and complained that Pont de Veyle swallowed up so much that there was nothing left for Paris and Abjon.

The Puppets Pass

Viewed from a little distance the château of Pont de Veyle looked very commanding, being set upon a rising ground at the head of the Veyle valley, where the land narrowed, the river running at the foot of the steep upon which the castle was built. From the upper windows one could see down the valley to rolling plains beyond. On either side rose hills covered with woods, that in spring were full of wild flowers, and in summer of wild strawberries, which the village children used to love picking. Down in the valley stood a small hamlet of a few houses, a church with a squat tower, and the curé's tiny little wooden-fronted dwelling, set on piles because it was so near to the Veyle.

One might have thought, however, that the curé's house did not belong to the curé, but was the property of Marthe and Henri, the man and wife who looked after him. Or rather of Marthe, who owned Henri, and appeared to own M. le Curé as well. Marthe was a woman of about forty-five, rotund of figure, clad usually in blue linen, and with light brown hair parted in the middle and combed back under a white knitted cap which she made herself. But on *fête* days, or when she went up to the château, she wore a great head-dress of white linen stiffly starched. Henri was a little spare man younger than his wife, lean and bronzed, with a stubbly red beard and moustache. Henri cultivated a patch of ground behind, reclaimed from the wood, and was not allowed by Marthe to do much indoors. Marthe mothered the curé as though he were a baby—she and Henri had no children—indeed she often called him her "*gros bébé*." And when there came a sudden call for him to a sick parishioner, and the messenger would say, "Thou wilt be sure to send him, Marthe?" Marthe would stand at the door, her big red arms akimbo, and the sun shining upon her round head, and answer dictatorially, "Ay, he shall come if I deem it fitting, not unless."

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

And she would go on in her scolding way, which was not really scolding.

"You wasters, who eat up his forces, and think that because he is your pastor he must do your bidding and suffer all your ills as well as his own, you have got old Marthe to reckon with—happily for him. He is not strong, I tell you, and if it be wet or cold he will not come and ye must die or get married—or whatever the case might be—without him."

Nevertheless, if the matter were fairly urgent she would wrap up M. le Curé, and put on his gaiters, and on dark nights send him forth, with Henri bearing the lanthorn to guide him, and if they returned not so soon as Marthe expected she would stand anxiously at door or window watching for them, and when they appeared would call, "Come, come, my children, a pretty pair to be so long and worry me into fits with your delay."

The curé was alternately "my child" and "my father" to Marthe, and she paid him small respect in private. But if ever Marthe had any special venture on hand she would herself kneel like a child and ask Monsieur le Curé's blessing thereon, believing firmly that her business would prosper the better if he gave it.

This was the simple village priest who, for many months represented the world of men to his Excellency, late Ambassador from His Majesty of France to the infidel Court of Turkey. An infidel himself, thought the curé—at heart, if not actually by profession. And the good pastor, finding clerical exhortation of little avail, betook himself to private intercession before the altar for the sick sinner, whom he regarded as doomed to hell. So when in the sacrifice of the Mass the curé specially offered up Monsieur de Ferriol's evil doings for pardon at the Throne of Divine Grace, he had the faith of a child that mercy would be shown to the irreligious old man accordingly. And who shall say that the priest's faith was not justified?

The Puppets Pass

As soon as spring came and the birds began chattering outside the château and making their own family arrangements, it was thought by the doctor that his patient might be taken back to the Hôtel de Ferriol. The Ambassador, by discreet questioning, had learned something of Aïssé's secret loneliness and of the rift—if it can be called by so definite a name—between her and Madame de Ferriol. Perhaps he understood better than Aïssé the causes for that want of sympathy which he gleaned indirectly had long existed between the girl and the elder woman. He had indeed some vague idea of taking Aïssé to live with him elsewhere than under his brother's roof. But there had been violent protests on the part of his brother and sister-in-law, and he had noticed reluctance on the part of Aïssé herself to begin a more independent manner of life under his protection. Moreover, he realised that to establish her as mistress of any house of his outside the Rue Neuve St Augustin might, in spite of his helpless condition, lend a fresh handle to the gossip-mongers who were already making free with Mademoiselle Aïssé's name in regard to their relationship. So he decided to go back and live in the Hôtel de Ferriol, stipulating that Aïssé should be lodged in a better chamber and receive more consideration, an addition of a female personal attendant being made to the establishment for her benefit and a chair and bearers provided for her especial use. In fact, the whole of the back wing, in which were the Ambassador's rooms, had been re-decorated and given over to their joint occupation, and as time went on Mademoiselle Aïssé held her own *salon* in the room which had been the boys' study, independently of that presided over by Madame de Ferriol. If there was jealousy Madame la Présidente found it to her interest to hide her feelings—at anyrate so long as the Ambassador lived. And as the months went on his health so far improved that the Ambassador's periodic attacks were often held for a

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

considerable time at bay, and though many times he had been like to die, devoted nursing brought him round again. On his best days he was able to lie on his couch—the lower limbs always powerless—or reclined in a specially-constructed chair, in which he was occasionally carried out of doors.

He had been a man of parts and of renown in his way, and had kept the instinct of lavish entertainment formerly habitual to him. Soon he gathered round him a *coterie* which divided the homage of its members between the *salons* at the front and at the back of the hôtel, for Monsieur de Ferriol was not always in the health or the mood to attend his sister-in-law's receptions. Many of the same guests came to the front and the back *salons* of the Hôtel de Ferriol, but there were likewise variations in type—old military men whom the Ambassador had known in his warlike youth, representatives of Eastern diplomacy, and others whom Madame de Ferriol could scarcely count as friends. Once there was a grand reception in both *salons* to the Persian Minister—he who was said to have inspired the celebrated Persian letters of Montesquieu—and the Ambassador quoted from Omar in the original, and from Chaulieu and the modern Epicureans, whom he translated for the Oriental's benefit. Of course Mademoiselle Aïssé wore her Turkish costume on that occasion. The decorous Madame la Marquise de Lambert, attracted to Aïssé, pitied her for what she considered her invidious position, but gave the girl credit for unimpeachable virtue, which all the lady presidents of *bureaux d'esprit* did not do. Madame de Lambert invited the young Circassian to her famous Tuesdays, at which the gambling set sneered, but to which they would gladly have gone had they been bidden. So, with the countenance of Madame la Marquise de Lambert, Mademoiselle Aïssé was launched in literary Paris of the highest tone, at which Monsieur l'Ambassadeur smiled

The Puppets' Pass

in grim humour, but was pleased, nevertheless, and encouraged his adopted daughter's friendship with Madame de Lambert.

Not so did he encourage the famous Dame de Volupté, Madame de Verrue, with whom he had once foregathered in Turin, but for that lady—who did not deserve some of the worst things said against her—he himself had a profound admiration. Then there were handsome, elderly dames of the *vieille roche*, with whom the dashing Count Charles de Ferriol had once been on the best of terms, and who now cherished for this wreck of a gallant both sentimental and compassionate regard. There were, too, a number of younger and more sprightly women of Society who liked to come because the Ambassador's *ménage* was out of the common, because he gave them quaint Eastern trinkets—a pleasant way of his with pretty women—and because they were curious about "*la belle Circassienne*." One of these visitors, a little later on, was young Madame du Deffand, but her day did not begin until she married and started *salon*-keeping in Paris about 1718. That was somewhat before Piron, the most brilliant of lampoonists, sneaked into Paris Society and took it by storm with his poems in Burgundian *patois* and his fireworks of epigrams. Grimm used to say of him that he was a "*machine à saillies*," and on the Ambassador's very worst days Piron would amuse him. There were other members of the *caveau*—that rendezvous of the clever young journalists and romancists—they of the "*Easter Eggs*," as the men of that set called themselves, who amused the old invalid, and whom he often helped in return with gold crowns and much-needed suppers.

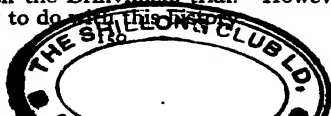
To go back to the ladies. Before Madame du Deffand, came Madame de Parabère, never clever enough to hold a *salon*, and who enjoyed the Ambassador's Turkish sweetmeats and well-cooked suppers better than the conversation of the wits and the poets.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

Never was there a woman who appreciated more fully the good things of life. Indeed, she was herself an embodiment of the *joie de vivre*, and charmed because she found the world charming. She always loved to distraction while she loved, and was always ready to love distractedly again. Everything she did was done with her two hands and her whole heart, even to risking the small-pox when she nursed her husband through that horrid malady. Heaven befriended her, for her dazzling beauty came out of the ordeal without a spot. The Ambassador had been a tender admirer of the lovely Madame de la Vieuville, her mother, and the young Comtesse de Parabère was an especial favourite of his. It was not long after she returned to Paris from Pont de Veyle that Aïssé's acquaintanceship began with naughty, fascinating Marie-Madeline de Parabère, and the acquaintanceship advanced with time steadily to friendship, scarcely even suffering from that untoward episode with the Regent—certainly no fault of Aïssé's.

But that came afterwards.

Now, in spite of the rude shocks she had received, Aïssé was too simple and childlike to be revolted by the natural hedonism of Madame de Parabère, and, moreover, it was not in Aïssé to think evil of anyone until the evil had been actually thrust before her eyes. Besides, at this time, Madame de Parabère, almost the same age as Aïssé, was scarcely launched upon the troublous sea of her emotions. She had only been married in the previous June, and it was not till several years later that she attracted the attention of M. the Duc d'Orléans, who was, in these days, in disgrace at Court, and said to be consoling himself for his forced separation from Mademoiselle de Séry by concocting poisons with Humbert, the chemist, for the destruction of the royal family. Never was accusation so baseless, but people had not forgotten the Brinvilliers trial. However, all that has nothing to do with this history.



The Puppets Pass

Enough that the Ambassador's *salon* became the resort of a variety of handsome, clever and interesting people glad enough to pay homage to the fair Circassian whose star was in the ascendant. She had her admirers, of course. For one, there was M. the Prince de Bournonville (brother of the lovely Angèlique-Victoire, Duchesse de Duras), who desired to marry Aïssé, but she refused to hear a word of love from him or any of the men who paid her court—not a few. She gave it as her reason that she would never, while he lived, leave her benefactor. But apart from that, the tearing of her veils of ignorance had given her a horror of the love-relation—as it had been presented to her—between men and women, and she often told herself that she would never marry. Only to a '*chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*,' she used to say, 'could she ever give herself, and how should one find a Bayard in the world of Paris?

The talk about her went that Mademoiselle Aïssé was cold: that she desired to have men for her friends, not for her lovers; that she was an anomaly—an Oriental with no Oriental characteristics—a vestal dressed *à la Turque*—a saint who consorted with sinners, a *devote* who admired the philosophy of the *libre-penseurs*. For the Ambassador, during his years of revel and joyance, with the wine-cup uplifted and the rose-garlands twined, had, in various visits to France, been in close touch with the Epicureans of the Château of the Temple—the *Temple du Goût*—as the Duc de Vendôme's palace of pleasure used to be called. He had taken part in the *fêtes* of the Ile d'Adam, and had sat at the feet of septua-octononagenarian Ninon, and while quaffing her draught of libertinism of the West had blended with it the heady nectar of the East.

"*Quelques femmes toujours badines,
Quelques amis toujours joyeux,
Une fille, en attendant mieux.*

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

*Voilà comme on doit sans cesse
Faire tête au sort irrité:
Et la véritable sagesse
Est de savoir fuir la tristesse
Dans les bras de la volupté. . . ."*

That was the song inspired by Ninon, and Charles de Ferriol chimed in from the book of wine and roses that he loved to translate to himself:

*"In this mad world of medley,
Make haste to pick some flowers.
Sit in the high places of laughter
And press the cup to your lips.
Heaven is heedless alike of sin
Or service, so make merry after your heart's desire."*

And now that old Ninon, with her rouge and her wrinkles, and her drooping eyelids and corkscrew eyebrows—pitiful travesty of the once all-conquering courtesan—had gone to prove her philosophy before the bar whence none may return to say whether indeed *la joie de vivre* be the soul's passport to elysium eternal, now that the Ambassador lay a helpless cripple with no more use for the rose garlands, there came still round his couch some of the old Epicureans—Châteauneuf, Ninon's last lover; de la Fare and his kind; the Abbé de Chaulieu, close on his death-bed and vaguely hankering after the Sacraments he had blasphemed and which he called for in the end—these and a few other survivals, with certain younger recruits, amongst whom the youngest and most notable was d'Argental's friend, Arouet de Voltaire.

Young as d'Argental then was, his *naïf* manliness had an odd charm for that youthful old-man-of-the-world, Voltaire, and the friendship between the two, of which everybody knows, began as far back as when Arouet used to call in at the lesson-room in the Hôtel de Ferriol and carry d'Argental forth with him on his walks abroad. This must have been for the interest of listening to the lad's simple views of life, that were in

The Puppets Pass

such curious contrast with Arouet's own pose as the disciple of atheistic Ninon and the satirist of all those primal faiths and feelings of which young d'Argental was an example.

For if Voltaire in his youth ever loved any comrade it was Charles d'Argental, and d'Argental loved Voltaire and made heroic struggles to cultivate his own immature intelligence and bring it nearer a level with that of his friend—at which struggles Pont de Veyle jeered politely, as his way was. Pont de Veyle and Voltaire did not get on; they were too much alike for one thing, and, for another, Voltaire's position was beneath that of the de Ferriol boys—a matter of no importance whatsoever to d'Argental, but of which Pont de Veyle thought a good deal.

Pont de Veyle was a *poseur* too, but he studied effect for effect's sake, and Voltaire practised it from the financial point of view. Voltaire was poor, and to him brains represented a profitable asset. He thought deeply, so that all the time he posed and curried favour with the great he despised himself for it, and in d'Argental's delightful freshness and simplicity doubtless found relief from his own torturing cynicism.

The mystic Saint-Maurice was the fashion then with his *genie* Alael, and his Paracelsian beliefs, blended with queer Eastern ideas concerning the transmigration of souls. This last was a theory for which, Epicurean notwithstanding, the Ambassador had a sneaking regard. He would invite Saint Maurice to perform his tricks in the back *salon*, where Saint Maurice used to say of Voltaire that he was in reality a highly-advanced entity taking a purgatorial incarnation for the paying off of debts incurred in a previous existence. At which, when he heard it, Voltaire would jeer wittily and beg that Monsieur Saint-Maurice would obtain him the schedule of his misdeeds so that he might duly balance his account and start with something to his credit.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

Aïssé was scarcely over seventeen when, as the Ambassador's adopted daughter, she received his guests in the back *salon*, but with this variety of social elements it can be imagined that long before the eleven years of their new relation was ended she had become an accomplished woman of her world. As his times of fairly good health lengthened, the Ambassador's old æsthetic delight in woman's grace of feature and form again asserted itself and he took great pride and pleasure in Aïssé's appearance and in the admiration her beauty excited.

He used to have her dressed—as one might dress a doll—in different costumes in order that he might judge which suited her best; and it was at his wish that she affected the simple flowing robe and shawl-like drapery that were more in accordance with her Oriental contours than the long tight bodices, the paniers and the *justaucorps* then in vogue.

That picture of her in Turkish apparel, smoking a long pipe of rose-perfumed tobacco, is perhaps due to the distinctiveness of her manner of dressing. As for the *narghileh*, it may have been perhaps an improvised accessory—the portrait-biographers of the Regency period being, like the authors of noels and pasquils, more regardful of scandalous effect than of truth. One must, however, protest against the gross libel in which are mentioned “the three *courtisanes philosophes*, Mesdames de Ferriol and de Tencin and *cette espèce de fille-mère*, Mademoiselle Aïssé.” Nevertheless, insulting as the description may be, it shows at least that Mademoiselle Aïssé was a person of some importance in her circle.

There was at this time in the mind of the Ambassador a strong desire to atone to Aïssé for any wrongs done her, and to make her life as happy as was possible in the conditions of her close tendance upon him. He liked her to go into Society—even on some rare occasions accompanying her. Not to other people's houses.

The Puppets Pass

But when anything very special was going on at the theatre or opera, he would, if he were well enough, have himself carried in his invalid chair to a box arranged for his accommodation. This happened more frequently during the year or two after his return to Paris from Pont de Veyle than in later years, when it must be confessed he grew into a rather querulous sufferer.

The greatest of those occasions was a gala performance during my lord Bolingbroke's triumphal visit to Paris as the Queen of England's envoy to His Majesty of France for the ratification of the Treaty of Utrecht.

No skulking across disguised in Morgan's vessel this time! No hiding at Ablon and rose-gathering, the sweeter for its secrecy! The rose had to be plucked in all the glare of Paris with hundreds of eyes noting every movement, glance and smile of the adored "Harré."

It was "Harré" here and "Harré" there—the toast at dinner, the cry of the street. "Vive Harré!" "Vive l'Angleterre!" Never had Harry St John in his best fortunes known such popularity as this. Alack! it was the swing of the pendulum before its rebound.

Queen Anne's autograph letter to His Majesty of France was in his pocket, awaiting the Royal command for delivery. With it the Royal draft of the Armistice. Minister de Torcy signed it after the toasting. Maréchal d'Uxelles was there, all hospitality, and the de Ferriols and dear Madame de Villette, come expressly to meet the great man.

Great and gorgeous truly. A fine figure of a man; with all and more of the old electric vitality—court fig, orders, full-bottomed State wig. He went to Fontainebleau with the Queen's letter to be presented on bended knee to the sun-king—that once blazing orb—now, its fires dimmed, the horizon touched, dark negation below.

Compliments to one another from the expiring

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

stars and God be praised for peace! and the most distinguished consideration for my lord the Queen's Ambassador! And Bolingbroke went back to Paris with the dead Dauphin's diamond upon his finger—a gift of the Grande Monarque.

He arrived in Paris on the Wednesday; he left it the following Wednesday. It was a *fanfaron* of acclamation—"Hail, Harré!"—all the time.

On one of the evenings they gave *The Cid* in his honour. Outside, in the narrow streets, coaches collided and backed into each other; crowds of lackeys pushed and shoved before their masters; gilded sedan chairs were borne by liveried servants up and down the steps. And so deafening were the cheers that one might have fancied it was the King himself arriving when my lord Bolingbroke stepped forth from his equipage, and every person in the house rose as he entered his box, while outside the cheering burst forth anew.

A fine sight it was—the opera house that evening; roses garlanding the boxes, which were all open, the tiers of them rising in a steeper slope than to-day; roses, real and artificial, twining the pillars. It was August, and the first blooming was nearly over, but Madame de Villette had roses in her bosom and in her hair.

She was there, of course—small-boned, slender, past her youth, but holding the heart-secret of being ever young—very graceful in long-pointed bodice, her dazzling neck and shoulders rising above the narrow bordering of brown fur—the broad fur that outlined her corsage. The Marquise de Villette was always in the height of fashion but never outdid fashion. She affected light delicate colours, and to-night wore sheeny satin of an apricot tint, with touches of brown fur that matched her glossy brown hair, arranged in natural curls. Her eyes were brown too, full and mild, but they could be sparkling, and even mischievous, under

The Puppets Pass

their arched brown eyebrows, which were not painted black, as the trick was of many women; and she had full human lips, and the most sweet and gracious way with her for all that she was also a very woman of her world.

Everyone in the play-bill was present that evening—on the stage and off it. In a large box in the curve, was the ex-Ambassador in his invalid chair—covered to the waist with his silken Eastern rug, only the upper part of his body alive, and the dark eyes very much alive as they followed each movement of Aïssé, whom he had placed—against her will—in the very front of the box. Dressed all in white, innocently happy, and, like the rest, adoring and applauding her dear milord and sympathising with the joy of her dear friend the Marquise, whom he had not met for a long time, Aïssé, unconscious of her own beauty, attracted much attention. By his brother was Président Augustin, in a scarlet mantle somewhat resembling a Lord Mayor's robe—his official full dress—and next to Aïssé Madame de Ferriol, feverishly bored, her gaze turning constantly to d'Uxelles in another box—d'Uxelles cynical, aged, but still attractive in her eyes, brilliant with decorations, grand militaire and Minister of State combined.

All Paris gazed, whispered and smiled. And Bolingbroke, the object of their whispers and smiles, leaned from the front of his box and had a radiant glance of recognition for everyone he knew and a courteous bend for the strangers who did him honour. Magnificent in full-skirted satin coat and knee-breeches and enormous curled peruke, with the strong, refined face, the long, well-shaped nose, the faintly humorous curve of lips, the wonderful flashing eyes. His breast glittered with decorations—there was no array of orders in the house like Bolingbroke's—and conspicuous upon his finger shone the dead Dauphin's ring—sign visible of the *entente cordiale* and of France's gratitude to this man who had done so much to make it.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

But the ghost was there, waiting for his Philippi.

In a box exactly opposite that garlanded box, whence the guest of the evening bowed his acknowledgments of the plaudits of the crowd, there sat the man who was to be Bolingbroke's undoing. An effeminate-looking youth, weak-chinned, and to-night of discontented visage, his own hair worn long and tied back with ribbon—it was not for exiled Royalty to do compliment in State peruke to the representative of its supplanter—a gentleman, with something of the Stuart charm and yet withal three parts a fool. The Pretender and the Plenipotentiary eyed each other gravely. No salute passed between them—Bolingbroke had promised Queen Anne that he would have no commerce with her half-brother. The hour was not come. When it came, the man was lacking. Had James Stuart shown himself but a quarter of a hero, no stranger from Herrenhausen would ever have sat upon the English throne.

Four years later times had changed indeed for my lord Bolingbroke.

The sun-king was gone, and Queen Anne was gone. German George lodged at Whitehall, and Harry St John, with attainder for high treason hanging over his head, made his farewell bow to blaze and power from an opera box in Drury Lane. Metaphorically, that is, for the great diplomatist gave no outward sign of defeat. To the last Harry St John swaggered through his part. He hired his box for the following evening. But when that evening came Morgan's ship was carrying M. la Vigne and his valet—my lord Bolingbroke disguised in plain brown coat and bob wig—over the water to Calais.

A very different entry into Paris this one from the entry of 1712.

You may be bound there was no Minister de Torcy hurrying to press hospitality upon him. It is said that

The Puppets Pass

he played the buffoon in his misfortune and laughed as he set forth for exile. But then, maybe, this was no real exile to Harry St John. His heart, we know, had ever been in France. And now the roses of Ablon bloomed for him anew at Marie-Claire de Villette's home, Marcilly.



CHAPTER II

THE LITTLE APARTMENTS

"DANS les destins succéda la Régence,
Temps fortuné marqué par la licence,
Où la folie agitant son grelot,
Jette sur tout un vernis d'innocence;
Où le cafard n'est prisé que du sot.
Tendre Argenton, folâtre Parabère,
C'est par vos soins que le dieu de Cythère
Régna en maître au palais d'Orléans,
Sur ses autels revoit fumer l'encens."

So wrote Voltaire.

The day of Philippe, Duc d'Orléans, had dawned at last. He was Monseigneur the Regent of France.

In the first twenty-four hours he showed that strangely strong side of his double nature, which, had it been better developed or been given opportunity to exercise itself in State affairs before the sensuous side overpowered the intellectual, might have turned the Regency period into a more ennobling chapter of French history.

He made his *coup d'état* with courage and promptitude, got his private information concerning the dead king's will, and on the 2nd of September—the day after Louis Quatorze breathed his last—d'Orléans forestalled the Duc de Maine and the rest of Louis's legitimised brood, had out the grey and black musketeers, and struck the note of power which Paris loved. Streets and great squares were lined with military, and Monseigneur the Regent, passing between rows of arms presented in a royal salute, stepped into the Palais de Justice and there claimed and obtained his rights. No question

The Little Apartments

now of his sole authority. He manned the ship of State and appointed the officers best culculated to serve his interests. Abbé Dubois was made Minister-in-Chief and practically governed France until he died a few months before his patron. A Privy Council was created; and amongst those who became members of the Council of Regency was Maréchal d'Uxelles.

The Jansenists were let out of the Bastille to give place later to the Cellamare conspirators—the last of d'Orléans's foes. Madame de Maintenon retired to St Cyr. Marly, Fontainebleau and Versailles ceased to be sinks down which the revenues of the country were poured. The baby-king lived in the Tuileries with his governess, Madame la Duchesse de Ventadour, and Monseigneur, the Regent, established at the Palais Royal opposite, watched over the child with a fatherly care that should have been entered to his credit in the Great Account, against many sins and follies for which, doubtless, Philippe d'Orléans had to do heavy purgatorial penance.

And now there were high times at Court, or rather at the several courts. For there was that of the Regent at the Palais Royal; and there was the court of his eldest daughter, Madame la Duchesse de Berry, at the Luxembourg and at La Muette—that riotous little court of orgy, trumpet-blowing and vulgar parade, all the pride of the world and all the lusts of the flesh, La Joufflotte—to call her by her nickname—always had a host of lovers in attendance, Riom, captain of her guard, and her secretly-wedded husband—so gossips said—paramount; but notwithstanding, the handsomest gallants of Parisian society filing in review as aspirants for the honour of this royal courtesan's passing caprice. Here only can be traced a point of contact between humble Mademoiselle Aissé and the degenerate successor of la Grande Mademoiselle of France. It was after this manner. Aissé's beloved Chevalier—

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

of whom more anon—had an elder brother, Antoine d'Aydie, who with his young wife held positions in the household of Madame la Duchesse de Berry. 'Twas he who presented the Chevalier to Madame of France, and thus it came about that the lover of Aïssé—before love changed him into the knight *sans peur et sans reproche* of whom Voltaire wrote—had been honoured, or degraded, by Madame de Berry's temporary partiality.

But it was a good while after the Regent's accession that her Chevalier came into Mademoiselle Aïssé's life.

To go on with the courts: there was one at Saint-Cloud, over which from her sofa presided indolent Madame Satan—as in the *intimité* of his *roués* the Regent called his wife. In public he treated her with greater honour than her own children, considering themselves *pur sang*, chose to accord to Madame de Montespan's legitimised offspring.

And there was the court at Raincy of blunt-spoken, unlovely Madame la Douarière; and at Chelles, the abbey in the forest, of that pretty, fantastical, Jansenist, erudite madcap, the Regent's second daughter, Mademoiselle de Chartres, Sœur Sainte Bathilde, in her Benedictine habit. And there was the court at Asnières of Madame de Parabère, *maitresse en titre*. And there was the humbler court of Emilie, the beautiful, majestic dancer—Emilie, who had the merit of loving Philippe d'Orléans better than she loved Monseigneur the Regent, and who, perhaps for that reason, was almost the only woman to whom Monseigneur the Regent ever allowed a voice in affairs of policy. Apart from all these there was, too, the learned court at Sceaux, over which Madame the Duchess of Maine held sway. Tiny, witty, intriguing Louise Benedicte, princess of the blood, with more talent and energy in one of her wee fingers than had her husband, the insignificant Duc de Maine, Madame de Montespan's legitimised son, whom, but for that stronger side of Philippe d'Orléans intervening,

The Little Apartments

Madame de Maintenon and the old king would have made virtual Regent of France. There, at Sceaux, were noels and madrigals and phillippics born in the famous *nuits blanches*, and the Cellamare conspiracy was hatched, and old Sainte Aulaire sighed, and young Voltaire made his earliest successes—all this is history and can be read about in its own place. But most of it has nothing to do with Mademoiselle Aïssé, who lived on at the Hôtel de Ferriol in secluded fashion when the Ambassador was ill; going forth into the world, and receiving in the back *salon*, when the Ambassador was well enough to think of anything but his own miserable body.

There came, however, into the new political turmoil and social hurly-burly one influence that considerably affected Mademoiselle Aïssé, in that it brought about an important episode of her career—her association with the Regent.

That influence was a triumvirate which had its seat in the house of the Abbé de Tencin, and of which the two male members were Abbé de Tencin and Abbé Dubois.

These two Abbés made a double intersecting force in the history of the time. The combination was one of tastes, temperaments and interests. A pair of libertines and unprincipled intriguers both; power and self-aggrandisement the gods of both; each desiring to cloak his iniquities before the world, each furnishing a mask of affected probity for the other, they played into each other's hands—Dubois, as we know, controlling the Regent; de Tencin, to a great extent, controlling the Church. One pulled political cords, the other ecclesiastical ones. And the threads converged to a base of operations in the home of Abbé de Tencin in Paris.

Here the third of this triumvirate of intrigue—and probably the most powerful of the three—took her place.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

Claudine Alexandrine de Guérin de Tencin had by this time escaped from her nunnery, had been made a canoness, and was now Madame de Tencin, taking brevet rank. First she had occupied rooms in a convent in Paris—a pretty nest of plotting, and worse. D'Argenson—the brutal Minister of Police—was her *cher ami*, the only man Claudine de Tencin ever feared. And yet she kept him in check by her cleverness, her coolness, her good-breeding, that last combined with a show of sanctimoniousness—the shelter in which she always took refuge when hard pushed. She spied for d'Argenson, cunningly unsealed envelopes, and informed him of their contents—a trick of the seekers and granters of *lettres-de-cachet*. Of course she gradually enriched herself with the rewards for her service, though—a small point to her credit—she loved power and intrigue better than money, and, it being well worth her while, she kept up a solid working connection with d'Argenson for the best part of her career. Thus her rooms in the convent became a sort of secret service bureau, the utility of which was obvious to de Tencin and Dubois. Before long Madame and her police-bureau were transferred to her brother's house, where she started one of the most famous *salons* in Paris, her sister's, Madame de Ferriol's, being nowhere in comparison.

It was a curious and subtle personality, that of Claudine Alexandrine de Tencin. Here is her picture as she was in Paris when naturally Aïssé saw much of her, at the time that she was in the zenith of her charms and her notoriety.

She conquered rather by her indefinable fascination than by actual beauty. Breeding and brains were her strong points. She had the air, the grace of an aristocrat of the old *régime*, the mind of a woman of to-day. Essentially modern, Madame de Tencin might well have lived in the twentieth century instead of in the eighteenth. Her intellect was equal to that of any man. Her

The Little Apartments

calculated variability made it impossible to be dull in her company. She was a born actress, and could play whatever part she pleased. The one she affected most was that of the injured nun, religious at heart, but lacking vocation for the cloistered life—too clever, and individual to submit to rule and harshly forced into a convent when she had been too young to realise her own capacity for active work. Yet she ranked herself always on the side of the Church, though she received the philosophers, for every shade of opinion was represented in her *salon*. Her dress, usually grey or white, or of some delicate neutral tint, had a simple elegance that was the result of much thought. She wore a large cross and jewels that had a distinctiveness of their own. Her oval face was serious in cast. Her dark eyes were large and expressive, and when she chose to exhibit a certain sparkle and devilry, latent but not always in evidence, flashed brilliantly. As a rule she kept her eyes half closed, and this gave her an appealing, myopic look. But there was not much that escaped Madame de Tencin's notice. She wore her crisply-waved dark hair parted in the middle, and usually dressed with great simplicity. She could suit her appearance and manner to every occasion, and never went to any social function without being prepared at all points. Her energetic brain must always be at high pressure. Such a woman was not to be contented with the frivolous occupations of an ordinary *mondaine*. But if ever she felt her powers flagging from over-exertion she would remain secluded in her room until she had fully recuperated them, since she would never show herself at a disadvantage. The passionate novels which she wrote in secret were a vent for the ardours of her temperament. But she never told anyone of her literary pursuits except her nephew, Pont de Veyle, later on, when he was old enough to appreciate them. Of all her relatives—outside her brother, who was perhaps the only person

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

whose advancement she desired as keenly as her own—Pont de Veyle was the one she liked best. They had much in common—the literary tendency for one thing, and the peculiarity of never making public all that they could do. It was Pont de Veyle's characteristic when, later, he took to writing comedies not to acknowledge his work, but to take a cynical pleasure in hearing it praised or condemned, while his identity as the author remained unrevealed. Like his aunt, he loved to shine, but preferred to do so in a morbid, reflected manner.

Madame de Tencin recognised in her nephew a kindred spirit, and soon discovered his knack of writing little poems, coining phrases, making *bon mots*. Both were fastidious, and each admired the other's polished manners. When she first came to Paris and had fewer social claims, and sometimes a solitary evening in prospect, his Aunt Claudine would send for Pont de Veyle to amuse her, or would go forth herself on foot or in a chartered chair and spend an hour with him at the Hôtel de Ferriol. She was not rich at first and had no chair or equipage of her own. By-and-by, when d'Argenson and Dubois gave her much money, and there was more besides coming from other sources, she had a finely-appointed coach.

Of secret *amours* she indulged in many. That was all part of a worldly woman's life then, but even in the case of a canoness of the Holy Roman Church inconvenient questions were not asked so long as the outward decencies were preserved.

These are not pretty things to write about, nevertheless they must be told if one has to show the true picture of the period.

But business before all else was her consideration, especially if the business be that of a decoy for the police. When the Cellamare conspiracy exploded, many arrests were made. Madame de Tencin's *salon* was a place to which male intriguers resorted unsuspect-

The Little Apartments

ing to pour their confidences into the attentive ear of their charming hostess. They might be admirers or lovers—what did it matter? D'Argenson and Dubois must be served. That young rake, Monsieur the Duc de Richelieu, deserved his fate. He already knew the Bastille. It was usually misplaced attachment on the part of royal ladies which had procured Richelieu his various incarcerations. This time he was arrested going one night out of Madame de Tencin's house.

No woman could succeed in the fashionable world unless she had been "passed" by the Duke of Richelieu, and Madame de Tencin was no exception to the rule.

There were other lovers—many of them. This ardent lady wrote the fervid love scenes in her novels from a comprehensive experience. A canoness of the Church, she might not marry, but she adopted the privileges of matrimony without its tiresome obligations.

Be it observed, the eleventh commandment—Thou shalt not be found out—was more important in those days than any in the Decalogue.

Though passionate she was utterly heartless. We all know that story of the infant abandoned on the steps of the Foundling Hospital—the child who was hers and Destouches's, and who grew up into the famous d'Alembert, friend of Julie de l'Espinasse. When Madame de Tencin was old and neglected, and d'Alembert had made his own name, she would have acknowledged him as her son had he not refused to own such a mother.

Such was Claudine de Tencin, a woman of whom, even in her own day, little good was said, and whom her memorialists have unanimously execrated. Nevertheless was she a force that could never be ignored.

Dubois perceived this quickly enough. Though not a man capable of strong passions, it is certain that he cared more for Claudine de Tencin than for any other woman with whom he associated. She played him cleverly, kept him for a long time as a distant admirer

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

only, and Dubois was not one to turn from the pursuit of a coveted object until he had secured it. She held him by reserving something that he never could gain. It was not likely that she could care for the weasel-faced, personally repellent, shrunken creature who must, however, have possessed some quality of magnetism to have climbed upward, step by step, as he did through favour of the great. His unscrupulousness made him feared, and probably that was his secret. Even the Regent, whom the man first corrupted, then ruled, while he could not do without Dubois, had for him no shred of real regard.

Madame de Tencin understood Dubois. He understood her as, equally, he understood her brother. The triumvirate was complete.

But not until Claudine had flown ineffectually for higher game. Clever woman as she was, she made one mistake in her judgment of character, and that was in the case of Philippe d'Orléans. She had counted upon becoming the mistress—in more than the one sense—of Monseigneur, of ousting Dubois and putting her brother into Dubois's place. The Regent saw her once in a mood of devilry and was attracted, though Claudine de Tencin was not his type. A big, full-blooded man himself, he preferred charms that were more fleshly than those of the ex-nun. He liked plump, simple, soft women who were not intellectual; above all things, women who did not interfere with the business side of life.

For when His Royal Highness the Regent had concluded his day's work with the reception of foreign ambassadors and other formal interviews, and at eight o'clock retired to his private apartments, he ceased to be the head of the State, and became plain Philippe d'Orléans, man of pleasure.

There was wisdom in his method, on the principle of all work and no play making Jack a dull boy. Monseigneur was by no means a dull boy, and the most

The Little Apartments

malevolent of Regent d'Orléans's biographers admit that he worked well during his working hours.

After they ended, all was gaiety, liberty and distraction.

The oval *salon*, where the much-talked-of suppers were served, was a fitting scene for such Sybarite feasts. A smallish room set round with oval windows, panels by Vanloo and Boucher, and doors opening into further private apartments, hung with silk, and having over-decorations painted by Watteau, Lancret and Natoire. Between the windows sconsoles of gold and mosaic. All round, candelabra surrounded by little mirrors which reflected the rose-shaded candles. Buhl cabinets, Smyrna carpets, gorgeous Oriental screens covered with birds of Paradise, an inlaid table dressed in finest damask and lace, round which the guests were seated in small oval-backed chairs, each one a work of art on account of the medallion miniatures set in the frames, but none more important than another. For here State ceremonial and the laws of precedence were abolished. Here the little comedienne from the theatres was as good as the most highly-born duchess. No passport was needed by the guests but beauty, wit, the faculty to amuse and please. One can see the women—vivacious, coral-lipped, lambent-eyed, dressed to perfection in a kind of demi-toilette, the open *justaucorps* over long tight *décolleté* bodices, small paniers, flowers, jewels, hair worn high, but in more natural curls than later erections in the way of coiffures. The men in silk coats with long full basques, ruffles, embroidered waistcoats, long and square, satin breeches, silken hose, jewelled garters and red-heeled shoes. It must have been a bit of Watteau done in the life.

People waited on themselves at supper, which—partly in chafing-dishes—was laid on the side-board, and the servants, after bringing it in, went away and returned no more.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

At the table itself all was artistic, elegant. There was no vulgar display of gold and silver plate. The dinner service was of rarest porcelain, with paintings by Watteau and Lancret on the plates. Objects of fantasy scattered about delighted the eye. Flowers and fruit were heaped in crystal dishes; goblets of jewel-like Venetian glass gave lustre to the wines. We have the *menus* still of these suppers, very much resembling a particularly choice little dinner of the present day. All the *plats* were light and exquisite. Game, soups, *laitances de carpes au coulis d'ecrevisses*—the Regent's own concoction—boned quails, partridge stuffed with truffles, *poulards de Mans* in aspic—the truffles were a discovery of the Abbé Dubois, who imported them from his own country, Perigord, and they had a *succès fou*; pheasants stewed in Madeira wine, ham cooked in Rhine wine; a dish of leverets' thighs soaked in wine and laid on slices of oranges—invented by the Duc de Richelieu, the youngest of the *roués*. For beverages—sparkling Moselles and iced champagne, Tokay and Cyprus wine of rare vintage; maraschino for liqueur, and a special *Rhum de Barbades*, brought over and made the fashion by my lord Bolingbroke.

And what manoeuvrings there were, what cajolings, what strivings for *entrée* to that "smart set" of the period! What enlistings of the good offices of the *roués*—Richelieu the reprobate but arbiter of taste in the matter of womankind; de Broglie, dubbed *Brouillon*; merry de Brancas—*la caillette gaie*; sentimental Canillac—*la caillette triste*; Nocé *Bracquemenarde*—Nocé, the heroic swashbuckler.

" *Nous nous enivrerons, don, don
Nocé memo y sera la la
Avec la Parabère.*"

So the song went.

For there were on occasions little good-tempered

The Little Apartments

refroidissements in the relations of the Regent and the *maitresse-en-titre*, when Nocé was the favoured one with our volatile Marquise.

But it should have been *place aux dames*. Foremost in rank—though in the oval *salon* were no degrees of priority—Madame the young Duchesse de Berry, who made an equivocal *début* at her father's suppers. There was no host or hostess either, nor much of titles, all, or most, being known by their nicknames, of which the above were samples of those given to the men. Madame de Berry was *La Joufflotte*, because of her plump, rosy cheeks; likewise *Le Beau Paon* from her love of pomp and gauds. Madame de Parabère was *Le Corbeau Noir*, on account of her brilliant black eyes and raven hair. Then there was piquante, free-spoken Marquise de Sabran, and the clever, artistic Madame d'Averne. And last of the Regent's loves, the romantic Duchesse de Phalaris, who was telling him a fairy-story when the death-stroke fell.

A godly procession of *dames Mortes*.

"*Où sont-elles ? . . .*
Mais où sont les neiges d'autan ?"

With the aristocratic courtesans came also to the oval *salon petites maitresses*, ballet-dancers, actresses and opera-singers—the latest craze. Jealousy was bad form at the Regent's suppers; life a comedy, not even to be taken seriously at that. There were the *habitués*, and there were also reinforcements from the outer circles—ladies on approbation, so to speak; wits on trial; anybody, in short, who was talked about. Among the outsiders, cold, sparkling Madame du Deffand, who would have liked to float on the current, but could not always let herself do so, and Madame de Tencin, not long launched on her Parisian career, and a little over-confident in her assault on the Regent's facile fancy.

The mistake she made was in taking too intellectual a view of the situation. On the first occasion when she

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé.

supped in the Little Apartments she used her arts too sharply.

Monseigneur was not in a propitious mood that evening, though Madame de Tencin may have been excused for scenting in him a revulsion from the extreme license that of late had crept into his entertainments. Madame de Tencin decided that intellect in the Regent was trying to assert itself over the senses and that she might profit by the new direction.

Her perspicacity was at fault. It was certainly true that Monseigneur desired a new distraction, and that he was revolting against the coarse crudity of those offered him. True, too, that mental companionship of a sort was what he craved, perhaps unconsciously. But that sort was not to be supplied by Madame de Tencin.

The fact was that the charming frivolities of the beautiful Marquise de Parabère were beginning to pall on him. And he had a suspicion, strengthened this evening, that she had gone over far in her flirtation with Nocé. Nor did he find Emilie, the actress, so attractive just now as formerly.

Emilie was not a guest to-night. For her class and profession this statuesque dancer was sensitive and refined of soul. On the last occasion when Emilie had supped in the oval *salon* she had shown such manifest shrinking from the free manners of the Regent's intimates that d'Orléans, jarred and disgusted also, had drawn her aside and released her from any obligation to come again. Yet though he had understood and sympathised with the girl's feelings, this episode caused a certain coolness in the Regent's relations with Emilie. The orgies continued, Monseigneur doubtless realising that he had no right to rebuke his *roués* for conduct that he had himself encouraged.

To-night he came in late, when all the guests were assembled at table. It was his command that no one should wait for Philippe d'Orléans. The fun had

The Little Apartments

waxed riotous, Richelieu and Nocé had gone beyond themselves in audacity. Several ladies of the theatre were present, and Madame de Tencin, who had schemed to be invited, now that she was here, found herself in very mixed company. Suave, graceful, insinuating, she forced attention by her polished manner and curious power of attraction. She was too clever a woman of the world not to appear deeply interested in her conversation with Fontenelle—a somewhat incongruous element in the party—but all the time she was furtively watching the Duc d'Orléans, whose eyes she knew were upon her and not a movement of whom escaped her.

Towards the close of supper there happened one of the madcap pranks not unusual at these festivities; the lights, which had gradually been getting fewer, were now suddenly all extinguished. Shrieks, laughter, and an amorous game of hide-and-seek followed. Monseigneur, out of tune apparently with the license he did not choose to forbid, withdrew into one of the smaller apartments, where only a shaded lamp shed its rosy glimmer upon the stands of flowers so placed that their perfume reached the supper-room without being too oppressive. Thither Madame de Tencin glided, and as if by accident placed herself upon a settee beside him. In the dimness, feigning to take him for Monsieur de Fontenelle, Claudine made an overture at once caressing and playfully satiric. Resuming their conversation as it were, her eyes gleamed up at the Regent through their drooping, heavily-fringed lids, and laying her soft hand audaciously upon his breast she said, in cooing tones:

"Ah, my friend Fontenelle, it is not a heart which beats here but a thinking-machine."

Monseigneur, captivated by the veiled coquetry of the look and the honey-sweet voice, imprisoned the pretty fingers within his own and carried them to his lips.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

"*Vrai Dieu!* Madame, the icy Fontenelle may have earned your reproach," he exclaimed, "but assuredly not Philippe d'Orléans."

The opportunity was made. Madame de Tencin turned on the whole battery of her charms. Adroit repartee, respectful adulation, plaintive appeal, lightly-barbed wit, a clever story at Monsieur de Fontenelle's expense, an amusing hit at one of the Duke's detractors, a little flattering badinage, and Monseigneur's attention was drawn.

The half-closed eyes unveiled their brightness and gazed through the shadows with bold allurements into his. When some of the lights shone forth again upon the glittering confusion of the supper-table and upon the flushed faces and slightly-disordered array of the revellers, Monseigneur, absorbed in Madame de Tencin's sallies, showed no desire to rejoin his guests.

Curious whispers went round. "A new favourite! A rival to la Parabère!"

Yet, notwithstanding his evident attraction, the Regent remained cold, and Madame de Tencin knew that she had failed in her attack upon his senses. There was still the citadel of his mind to storm. She was well aware of his love of music and poetry—was he not credited with having written charming verses to Mademoiselle de Séry?—of his passion for chemistry and, in spite of his materialism, his interest in things occult. If his handsome face had lines which told of indulgence of the flesh, his eyes in their profound sadness gave evidence that he had a soul.

Madame de Tencin cunningly steered the talk along these various lines—art, science, mysticism, philosophy, and—fatal error—politics. From literature and *Rhum de Barbades* naturally to my lord in exile, Bolingbroke, and the rumour of his having accepted phantasmal seals of office from the exiled king at Bar—James Stuart.

The Little Apartments

Then by natural transition to the Scotchman Law and the great Banking Scheme which was to make France the most prosperous country in Europe. To which the Regent replied politely that since the Exchange of France had been exhausted by foreign wars, to replenish it was obviously an act of justice upon the part of a foreigner.

Emboldened, Madame waded deeper into the waters, her graceful gestures and captivating play of lips and eyes—the more captivating still in this rosy half light—enabling her to keep her footing. A chorus of laughter in the oval *salon* called forth by some audacious remark from the released and irrepressible Richelieu brought an allusion to the collapsed Cellamare conspiracy, and remotely to the confidence reposed by d'Argenson in Madame de Tencin's zeal and discretion in regard to the unmasking of Monseigneur's enemies. She hinted at fresh machinations of the Duchesse de Maine at Sceaux, conveyed tentatively that she herself possessed private sources of information—resources that were at Monseigneur's command—suggested that woman's wit might occasionally prove a more effective instrument in the war of policy than man's stronger but less subtle weapons of attack and defence.

The Duke was looking fixedly at his charming companion. Had the light been less dim she might have seen his gathering displeasure. He made a movement to rise.

"Madame," he said, "when God created woman He endowed her with so many powers of beauty and charm for the subjugation of man that it would not have been just had He bestowed upon her an equal intelligence. The master-mind was given to Adam, so woman's hand is not required to guide the helm of State. I may remind you," he added, with a courtly bow and an ironic laugh, "that Eve's first essay in diplomacy was

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

not calculated to inspire Adam with confidence in her judgment."

Madame de Tencin's blood rose at the rebuke. She curtsied low, but could not contain the slightly-insolent retort:

"Monseigneur is pleased to consider our grandmother Eve's negotiations with the serpent as a failure," she said in sarcastically-subdued accents, "but has it occurred to your Royal Highness that M. le Serpent, proverbially a friend to our sex, may, in giving Eve the apple, have presented her with somewhat of his own subtlety?"

Again the ironic bow.

"*Vrai Dieu!* Madame, one may well believe that! Nevertheless, not even M. le Serpent with all his wisdom could prevent Eve's daughters enduring centuries of discomfort owing to their ancestress having on that occasion partaken of diet unsuited to her delicate digestion."

CHAPTER III

THE FAIR CIRCASSIAN

HISTORY has not done justice to the better part of Philippe d'Orléans. His vices have been flaunted in the eyes of posterity; his virtues have received scant commendation. The episode of Madame de Tencin exemplifies one of them. He had determined, when he took up the reins of State, that in his time France should not be governed by mistresses as in the days of his predecessors, and he rigorously kept to his resolution. For his own character it might have been well had he not done so. The women whom he chose were mere toys of his hours of relaxation.

Yet this was not because he was incapable of appreciating a higher type of woman—that was proved by the influence in earlier years for good of Mademoiselle de Séry—the Comtesse d'Argenton. Had this relation continued, or had he ever come under the legitimate sway of a woman of refined intellect and high ideals, who, while satisfying his senses, could have lifted his mind and moral character, he would have been a very different individual.

But here his dual nature operated. He kept the two sides of his life apart. On the one hand, his graver studies and the business of the nation. On the other, sensual indulgence with women of low mental calibre, who, from the highest to the lowest, with perhaps those two exceptions—Mademoiselle de Séry and the dancer Emilie—made no appeal whatever to his nobler self.

And for this, Dubois, who had fostered his pupil's

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

youthful vices in order to obtain ascendancy over the future Regent, was the person chiefly to blame.

Madame la Présidente de Ferriol was not in the "smart set" of the *petits soupers*. In truth, about this time things were going very ill at the Hôtel de Ferriol. But for the Ambassador's generous subsidies there would have been less of the pomp and luxury of which socialistic young d'Argental complained.

For Nemesis had come upon Président Augustin.

The famous Tribunal of Justice against the Financiers—the most popular of the Regent's reforms—began operations in the year 1716. The account was called for from our poor Président of his disbursement of those monies by which, nominally, the prestige of King Louis Quatorze—of execrated memory—had been maintained abroad; the accounts, too, of all those *Fournisseurs* who had supplied the foreign armies with food and clothing at a stupendous profit to themselves; the accounts of the Jew money-lenders who had made loans to the King at a percentage beyond the highest known rates of usury. Woe and lamentation in the tents of Israel—in the palaces of *la haute Finance* which adorned the finest quarter of Paris. Woe and lamentation likewise among the *cocottes* and the *filles d'Opéra*. Witness the caricatures of the day—the financiers in pillories, the *cocottes* in tears and rags. Read again the *pasquils*:

"Pleurez malheureuses grisettes,
Pleurez, gibier de malidicters:
Ou bien chantez adieu paniers,
Car pour vous, vendanges, sont faites.
Avant la juste décadence.
De tous ces riches partisans.
Combien aviez-vous eu en présents,
Hôtels, bijoux en abondance:
Mais depuis que le sort fatal
A renversé voire fortune,
Ou iras-vous ? a l'hôpital:
Ou bien raccrocher à la bruno."

The Fair Circassian.

A fine commotion, as may be seen, did that tribunal create! Who could have imagined a cleansing Hercules in the person of frivolous, dissipated Philippe d'Orléans? But even rakes sometimes upset popular calculations.

A number of the wealthiest "City" men in Paris were ruined. It needed John Law, financier—a year or so later—to put them on their feet again. Meantime the treasury reaped in gold and real estate, restitution funds and fine hotels in the Vendôme quarter. Anyone who likes can read in certain State papers the lists of those taxed. Président Augustin de Ferriol's name is down with those of Samuel Bernard, banker, the Frères Paris, le fournisseur Forges, Claude le Blanc, Le Roux, caissier central; Paul de Payneuf, fournisseur de vins, and a host of others. The taxes of some of these ran to millions of livres. Président de Ferriol was let off for 150,000 livres. But even 150,000 livres is a large sum to find. The de Ferriol revenues never recovered the loss, which was more severely felt after the death of the Ambassador—when his pensions ceased—than before that event.

Heavy, dull Président Augustin took the affair very badly. It preyed upon him in a way that argued rather carelessness in his trafficking with public money than intentional culpability. The Ambassador, too, suffered a keen sense of shame. One attack of illness after another caused Mademoiselle Aïssé to have her hands full for a considerable time.

Moreover, the financial pressure and loss of prestige on the part of the Président told on Madame de Ferriol's temper, and did not tend to harmonious understanding between the ladies of the de Ferriol family. Madame de Ferriol, troubled, peevish, was jealous of Aïssé—jealous of the money lavished upon her by the Ambassador, which the elder woman thought should be devoted to the relief of his brother's family; jealous of the attention Aïssé now excited, and of the increasing

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

popularity of the back *salon*. It was an eighteenth-century rendering of a modern instance—the younger generation knocking at the door.

And Madame de Tencin, the sister of Madame la Présidente, was jealous of Aïssé too, though indeed she had less cause, for her own personality and her own *salon* were more attractive by far than those of the Circassian. Madame de Tencin's feelings towards Aïssé have already been described. Time had not changed them. Madame de Tencin and her brother felt also that the money spent on Aïssé should have been devoted to their sister's use. At least the de Tencin brood had the merit of family affection. The Abbé was always the head—the revered Churchman, and he had enough of the religious—or it might be safer to say the ecclesiastical—sense to sustain the position. Claudine de Tencin's schemings in regard to the Regent and Dubois may have been partly inspired by the desire to protect her sister's husband from the consequences of his folly. At all events they were always actuated by the wish to raise her brother. Let her have the credit of so much of disinterested motive. It is a small item in the inconsiderable sum on her side.

But if she did use her influence to get the misappropriation fine reduced for her brother-in-law, Madame de Tencin took her recompense later, when the great John Law boom set in. Président Augustin was a useful cover for her own speculations. So indeed were various other men, and, as the La Fresnaye incident by-and-by showed, it was not a paying business to be associated with Madame de Tencin in the game of stocks and shares. Her partners—M. de Ferriol included—came out losers, while Madame de Tencin in these operations assisted to a very fair extent the income she was making by her services to d'Argenson and Dubois.

As for Dubois, he was mounting his ladder by quick

The Fair Circassian

steps. Alas, alas! for poor exiled Harry St John, who in the midst of his Stuart schemings had again to borrow the *guinguette* from Madame de Ferriol and there lie *perdu*.

Alas, too, for the Pretender, James Stuart, no longer recognised by France as legitimate King of England! Dubois had carried through his successful expedition to Holland—the debating-ground of European diplomacy. Well might he crow over d'Uxelles—Minister for Foreign Affairs—against whose advice he had undertaken the mission. He had brought Poussin's *Seven Sacraments* and the treaty between the three powers for signature. All went gaily according to the *chansonnettes*:

" *Arrivant d'Angleterre,
L'Ambassadeur Dubois,
En mettant pied à terre,
Aperçut les trois rois:
Faisons vite un traité,
Dit-il, avec ces princes,
Donnons des millions,
Don, don,
S'ils ne suffisent pas
Là, là
Lâchons quelques provinces."*

Setting aside the provinces, Dubois's diplomacy triumphed splendidly, and he even received an autograph letter from German George of England, applauding his efforts. One may be quite certain that Madame de Tencin had a finger in the pie. Nothing much went on in the worlds ecclesiastical and political—which meant the same thing then—that was not first discussed in Madame de Tencin's *salon*.

This, however, does not concern Mademoiselle Aïssé, outside the fact that in his many manœuvres at the Hague Abbé Dubois arranged that Czar Peter the Great of Russia—then picking up information in Holland—should pay a visit to Paris in the following

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

year. Accordingly Czar Peter came, and was received with a stately ceremonial which somewhat embarrassed the uncouth Russian bear.

The palace of the Louvre was offered to him for a residence, but he preferred the humbler Hôtel Lesdiguières in the Marais, and when the baby king was conducted there by the Regent to pay a State visit, and the Russian giant took the beautiful boy in his arms and kissed him before the people, the crowd cheered lustily and compared the two to St Christopher and the Infant Jesus.

Going back to the case of Mademoiselle Aïssé, Czar Peter was one of the instruments of which Destiny in her queer, roundabout fashion made use for bringing the fair Circassian into touch with the Regent, and so testing her by what, to a different type of woman, might have been an irresistible temptation.

Russia! The East! The Ex-Ambassador to Turkey—the beautiful Circassian! It seems a natural concatenation. Perhaps the Czar had had some diplomatic relations with his late Majesty's envoy to the Porte; perhaps through Dubois or others he had heard of the de Ferriol *salons*—possibly indeed of Mademoiselle Aïssé herself. On the outside of things there would appear something a little odd—considering that Madame de Ferriol was not in the Court set and that history expressly mentions this occasion as the first on which the girl Aïssé was presented to the Regent—in the whole party from the Hôtel de Ferriol being invited to the Duchesse de Berry's *fête* at the Luxembourg in honour of the Imperial visitor.

It is safe, however, to suppose that a more natural occurrence brought this about. Monseigneur himself, we may conjecture, helped Destiny in pulling the strings. History does not relate in detail how, a short time before Madame de Berry's garden-party, the Regent

The Fair Circassian

stumbled by chance upon Aïssé one afternoon as she was passing out of Madame de Parabère's drawing-room. It only gives the fact. Here it is easy enough to fill in.

Monseigneur was *incognito* and had entered unannounced. Before Madame de Parabère or her companion were aware of his presence he had given himself time to admire the pretty picture which the two women made as they said their adieux.

Madame *la Maîtresse en titre* stood sideways to him—a typical marquise *à la Watteau*—long, pointed bodice and brocade paniers over a silken underskirt, high-heeled shoes, jewels, flowers, the loveliest neck and shoulders in the world, and the most shapely arms and hands extended to her visitor. Aristocrat and grisette in one, as the way then was with high-born dames—rose-pink cheeks, red, pouting lips, delicate, aquiline nose, arched eyebrows over sparkling dark eyes, a disdainful little head, a personality all colour, life, attractiveness—the Regent knew her charms by heart. Yet it was not on Madame de Parabère just now that his gaze was rivetted, but upon her companion. The greatest contrast imaginable to the Comtesse de Parabère was Mademoiselle Aïssé, with her pale oval face, her large, pensive, Oriental eyes and vague sweet smile. She looked taller than she was because of her slender form and the long lines of her robe—to-day of some soft, pale, blush-pink silken material with an embroidered *crêpe* shawl heavily fringed, draped round her shoulders in the three-fold fashion of the East. In her dress, as much as in her face, Aïssé invariably struck the distinctive note. For head-gear to-day she wore a sort of turban in two shades of pink—what nowadays might be called a toque—and above her forehead, resting on the rippling waves of her night-dark hair, was a single white rose.

At once, on perceiving the Regent, which she was

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

the first to do, Aïssé moved to retire, and with a deep curtsy passed him towards the door. Of course, had he been announced and attended with due ceremonial it would not have been etiquette for her to leave without permission. It was a little shock to Aïssé this confirmation of the gossip she had heard in connection with Monseigneur and Madame de Parabère. She never thought evil unless it were forced upon her, and she honestly liked Madame de Parabère for her good heart. But Aïssé was now well on in her twenties and knew her world.

When the Comtesse turned she saw instantly the change in the Regent's face. He too had turned and was gazing fixedly at the vanishing form of the girl. He made a half gesture to detain her, but realised that it was his own semi-incognito that gave her the opportunity to escape, and by this time she had gone through the curtained doorway.

Madame de Parabère was proverbially free from jealousy. She gave her lovers full tether, and when Monseigneur asked eagerly, "Who is she?" Madame laughingly replied, "But, *mon cher*, do you not know? The beautiful Circassian. That is Mademoiselle Aïssé."

"Mademoiselle Aïssé!" he replied. "I have heard of her. So *that is la belle Circassienne?*"

Madame de Parabère scented awakened interest, and was not altogether pleased, her large-heartedness notwithstanding. She parried her liege's questions about the girl and drew his attention to herself. Whereat the Regent, being wily in regard to women, said no more of Aïssé. He did not forget her, however, and soon afterwards came the invitation to the Duchesse de Berry's *fête*.

Meantime Madame de Parabère, who must always out with whatever was in her mind, informed her next visitor, who happened to be Madame de Tencin, of how

The Fair Circassian

Monseigneur had seen Aïssé departing, and the effect she had produced upon him.

Madame de Tencin took the news home with her and pondered upon it. She saw her way to a profitable intrigue. Being a wise woman, after her first indignation at the Regent's rebuff of her own overtures, she had pocketed the affront. Now she decided that though he had the bad taste not to appreciate her own peculiar charms, yet his weakness for her sex should nevertheless be turned to the advantage of herself and family. Madame de Tencin hated Aïssé, as has been seen, but that was no reason why she should not make use of her. She had little confidence in Madame de Ferriol's less finished talent for intrigue, but when she heard of the Duchesse de Berry's invitation to the *fête* in honour of the Czar, she could not forbear from giving Madame de Ferriol a hint.

La Présidente was grumbling at the unnecessary expense of a new gown for Aïssé—the girl was singularly indifferent in these matters, and Madame de Ferriol, at the Ambassador's wish, still bought her dresses, making what she could out of the transaction. Aïssé and the Ambassador between them insisted upon the girl's own distinctive style. Otherwise Madame de Ferriol, whose taste was good, had *carte blanche*—the Ambassador supplying the money without inquiring into details.

To-day Madame de Ferriol complained that the Ambassador wished Aïssé to go to this party.

"For of what use is it?" said Madame. "Aïssé will never marry. She does not look long enough at a man for him to be attracted by her, and 'tis sheer waste dressing her up and taking her out."

Madame de Tencin gave her sneering laugh.

"Before one can make money out of an adventure, one must put money into it," she said. "I strongly

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

advise, *très chère*, that upon this occasion at least no expense should be spared in showing off our sweet Mademoiselle Aïssé to the best advantage."

So yet again was the fair Circassian put up for sale in the slave-market.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROYAL GARDEN-PARTY

It appeared, when the day of the Royal garden-party arrived, that expensive simplicity was to be the note of Mademoiselle Aïssé's attire.

She was all in white; her dress bordered with a trimming of snowy marabout feathers, a soft white scarf draping her shoulders, her head-dress white, of the turban kind she usually wore, with only a touch of pale pink in the flower that rested on her hair and that matched the pale pink of her cheeks. This style of head-dress suited her broad, white forehead, regular features and almond-shaped eyes. She wore curved gold earrings, each set with a large pearl, and a long gold chain studded at intervals with fine pearls, which the Ambassador had given her.

Comte Charles de Ferriol did not go himself to the *fête*. His health had been in a very shattered condition of late. Indeed Dangeau, a journal-writer about that time, reports the Ex-Ambassador to the Porte as being so dangerously ill that he was not expected to live. Naturally Madame de Tencin and her sister took care that he was kept in ignorance of any design on the part of the Regent upon his adopted daughter.

The Luxembourg Palace was the Duchesse de Berry's town residence.

A youthful widow, "Madame" of France, and taking to herself all prerogatives of her birth—St Simon tells bitterly of her ostentatious progresses through Paris escorted by guards and trumpet-blowers—a child of Satan succeeding in anything and always hysteric-

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

ally sure of herself. Marie Louise Elizabeth, Madame la Duchesse de Berry by birth and marriage of the line royal, was a very great lady indeed.

In appearance and manner, however, *La Jouvflotte* did not bear out the traditions of high lineage. This was where temperament came in, or perhaps a less noble strain on the side of her grandmother de Montespan. Madame de Berry had the Montespan sparkling dark eyes and arched brows, the latter over accentuated, for they went up too high into her rather bulbous forehead. But the Montespan sprightliness had in her degenerated into hoydenish vulgarity. She was short, plump, of blond complexion, and with a red, rather thick-lipped and laughing mouth. Her best points were her beautiful arms and extremely pretty feet and ankles, always showily slippered and encased in conspicuously-patterned silken stockings. She gesticulated 'reely with her arms and showed her feet and legs with an absence of all prudish scruples. She had a trick of rolling gait—the sway of the hips suggesting slight intoxication. If one may believe history, as set forth by her paternal grandmother, the bluff-spoken Dowager d'Orléans, she was not infrequently tipsy. Her dress was always loud. To-day she wore a blend in which yellow satin predominated, and the fashionable paniers were heavily trimmed with gold loops and pendant gilt tassels. When she was not giving herself egregious airs she went to the opposite extreme of undignified good-fellowship. To-day she had received under a state canopy—a whim of hers—for at the opera, too, she always sat under a sort of baldaquin, surrounded by guards and lackeys, and attended by all manner of regal ceremonial. But long before this reception was ended she had grown tired of pompous etiquette, and was swaggering hither and thither with flurried steps, laughing and talking in a loud, free-and-easy fashion that certainly did not befit a princess. She had her bodyguard of admirers—Riom

The Royal Garden-Party

the chief—treating her with something of the same insolent *brusquerie* as his uncle Lanzun had adopted towards her great-aunt, La Grande Mademoiselle, whose eccentric ghost might well have haunted the palace of the Luxembourg. Czar Peter's great form constantly overshadowed *La Joufflotte*. He admired her hugely, and his Tartar pleasantries did not tend to make hers more refined.

A contrast to her sister was the lovely, vivacious, spirituelle little Sœur Sainte Bathilde, Abbess of Chelles, otherwise Louise Adelaïde, Mademoiselle de Chartres of France, who, through all her madcap volatility, and the queer combination she presented of sportswoman, artist, scholar and devotee, could never have been mistaken for anything but a *grande dame*. She had a way of blending her costume as she did her various personalities, and most bewitching did she look, her small, piquante face, golden hair and laughing lips and eyes showing under a modified and expansive form of Benedictine coif, while the lower part of her dress was modelled on the classic draperies of a Diana huntress.

It was Mademoiselle de Charolais, another royal coquette, who made it the mode to be painted *à la Capucine*, and inspired the verse:

*"Frère Auge de Charolais
Dis-nous par quelle aventure
Le cordon de saint François
Sert à Vénus de ceinture."*

A Watteau picture of a *fête champêtre*, that royal garden-party; how much more picturesque a sight than the garden-parties at Buckingham Palace and Marlborough House nowadays! If one could only reproduce the scene in all its colour and vivid life! The brilliant dresses against the green. Madame de Berry's canopy was set on the lawn with the grey walls and pilasters of the Luxembourg Palace showing through the trees—The park-like grounds, shady paths winding away

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

through the landscape, where also a streamlet meandered; terraces approached by marble steps, peacocks, whose gorgeous plumage vied with Madame de Berry's splendid finery, preening themselves on the balustrade; fountains, urns, statues, rose hedges—a picturesque background to the moving crowd of magnificent courtiers and smiling, be-ribboned ladies.

All Paris was there. Paris of the high life, and of the new high finance also. The aristocrats were all kow-towing to plain John Law of Lauriston, whose signature turned paper into untold gold. There were old beaux and young-wits. Voltaire fawning cynically upon his betters; the Abbé de Tencin, suave and stately; Dubois in new purple robes—he had lately been created Archbishop of Cambrai; the bully d'Argenson, full of his own importance as Minister of the Police; Président de Ferriol, slouching behind Law, his new salvation; Madame, graceful and elaborately dressed; d'Uxelles, a blend of the soldier, the fop and the statesman. There were the *roués*, the Regent's bodyguard, a glittering band—curled perukes, long-skirted satin coats, knee-breeches, jewelled garters, red-heeled shoes, and with the Court-dress solemn bowings and curtsies and curvings of arm and of satin-clad haunch, that reminded one of a *minuet de cour* danced in the dead Sun-King's best days. They entered in force — *Brouillon, le Gros Poupart, le Gros* ~~le Gros~~ *triste* and *Braquenarde*—Nocé playing with Richelieu, that Prince of rakes, a silly game of rivalry, in the good graces of La Parabère, who was now ~~to~~ to pique the Regent's jealousy. Central figure of all, Monseigneur the Regent himself, moving about more freely as his daughter's guest than had he been the official host of his illustrious Russian visitor. A man among men. For all the ill that has been said of Philippe d'Orléans, he was the First Gentleman of France; dignified, affable, apparently amused, yet with those tired and strangely

The Royal Garden-Party.

spiritual eyes wandering from one group to another, as though they were searching in uncertain fashion for something or someone he had not yet found.

Madame de Tencin, richly but quietly attired—distinctive cross—veil of gossamer lace, every detail perfect, gliding unobtrusively through the throng; subtly attracting, dominating, without seeming to do either, she watched every movement of Monseigneur, and kept her eye likewise upon the object of his vague quest.

It was Aissé's disposition not to put herself into the foreground, partly from a natural, indifferent reserve—not shyness—and partly from pride, an innate pride which, since the Ambassador had told her all he knew of her lineage, made her feel that she was as well-born or better than any in her world.

She chatted with her friends, presenting a perfectly calm and self-confident exterior, and moving from one set to another with her usual gracious sweetness, but with no knowledge that the Regent's eyes had at last discovered her, and that Madame de Tencin was observing them both.

Madame de Tencin waited her opportunity. When she saw that the Regent's gaze was fixed on the girl, she went swiftly up to Aissé, and speaking caressingly, slid her arm within that of the Circassian and drew her off in the direction she wished her to take.

Aissé responded somewhat stiffly, but with politeness. She had learned that while she remained in the Hôtel de Ferriol it was well not to show the cold shoulder too markedly to either M. l'Abbé de Tencin or his sister the Canoness. Presently, however, seeing that Madame de Tencin was, apparently unconsciously, making for the spot where the Regent stood, Aissé took an opportunity for slightly widening the distance between them by addressing another friend, who was strolling in a parallel line.

Madame de Tencin placed herself purposely in the

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aissé

Regent's path and curtseyed with modest demeanour, while one bright, appealing glance from between her quickly-dropped eyelids gave him the occasion of which she felt sure he would avail himself. She was right. He bowed graciously and expressed the hope that she was being well amused.

Claudine responded with gratulatory compliments upon the magnificent hospitality of Madame la Duchesse de Berry, but the Regent's gaze wandered towards a narrow alley, bordered with dark ilexes, down which Mademoiselle Aissé had discreetly flitted. Madame de Tencin, divining his thoughts, had no difficulty in steering him in that direction. It was magnanimous of her, she thought, seeing that at their last meeting he had snubbed her efforts to please him. But Madame de Tencin was too clever a woman to let him see that she remembered that.

Just then d'Argenson, big, stern, rugged of face, curt of manner, came up and asked permission to speak to Monseigneur concerning some wish that the Czar had expressed.

Madame de Tencin gave her friend of the police-force a meaning look which he understood. To the Duke she craved to be excused, adding that she saw her niece a little further along, who was wishing to rejoin her.

The Regent's eyes followed hers down the ilex path, and were arrested by the white figure of Aissé, who had, all unsuspecting, turned, and now paused in obedience to Madame de Tencin's signal.

"Your niece," said the Regent, courteously. "*Vrai Dieu* ! Madame, one would have said your sister."

"Mademoiselle Aissé is not really my niece, sir," returned Madame de Tencin, sweetly, "though she has passed as the child of my sister and brother-in-law. She is the adopted daughter of Count Charles de Ferriol, his late Majesty's Ambassador to Turkey. Your Royal

The Royal Garden-Party

Highness may perhaps have heard of her by the name she is sometimes given, '*La belle Circassienne*.' "

The Duke repeated, "*La belle Circassienne*! I have heard of Mademoiselle Aïssé, but have never spoken to her."

The Regent's gaze still wandered towards the ilex alley, but Aïssé had been drawn off by the Duc de Richelieu, suddenly coming upon her through a side glade, and was not now visible. D'Argenson noted his look of disappointment and smiled grimly to himself. Again he and Madame de Tencin exchanged rapid glances. Hers said plainly, "Detain Monseigneur till I have effected the introduction." D'Argenson gave an imperceptible nod. Madame de Tencin addressed the Regent.

"Mademoiselle Aïssé has long cherished a secret desire for the honour of presentation to your Royal Highness, if, sir, I have your permission."

The Duke laughed and pulled his moustache in slight embarrassment.

"Present Mademoiselle by all means, Madame; it would be a sin were the lightest wish of one so lovely left ungratified."

Madame de Tencin curtsied demurely, and with her swift, gliding steps moved after Aïssé, while d'Argenson held the Regent in conversation.

In a minute Madame de Tencin was catching up the other two. Richelieu, unable to bear that any game should escape his pursuit, had of late been trying to overcome the fair Circassian's indifference. He had, of course, been in the habit of meeting her in the *salons* of Mesdames de Ferriol and de Tencin.

Born actress as was Claudine, she knew how by the very inflexion of her voice, to convey the impression she wished to make, and meeting Richelieu—who had had the temerity to pluck a handful of lilies from the Royal garden and present them to Aïssé—she accosted him in

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

a tone of sweetly satirical banter. "Had he so poor an eye to business as to leave Nocé and Madame de Parabère to wheedle information concerning the Compagnie des Indes out of Monsieur John Law, without making an attempt to benefit himself likewise?" For it was well known—indeed history tells of how Nocé played stockbroker to Madame de Parabère, and of the enormous profits he secured for her.

Richelieu could play the game of badinage about as well as Claudine; these two also understood each other.

"*Très chère*," said Madame de Tencin, caressingly, to Aïssé, "you have often said that you were interested in Monseigneur the Regent. I have procured for you the honour of his acquaintanceship."

It was quite true that Mademoiselle Aïssé had expressed interest in the Regent. The personality of the man had always vaguely appealed to her. But now she shrank a little.

"I have done nothing to merit the honour of presentation to His Royal Highness," she faltered.

But Madame de Tencin peremptorily led Aïssé back along the alley, and the girl was reluctantly compelled to accompany her.

"Sweet flower of the East!" said Madame, with her cynical laugh—she had a trick of using Oriental imagery in her speech with Aïssé, too often intended to remind the girl that she had been bought as a slave. "Have you not learned that in some fortunate cases it is not necessary for one *to do* anything in order to deserve an honour? One has simply *to be*." And as Aïssé waived aside the compliment, Madame continued:

"Many a woman would shake Paris to its very foundations if by so doing she could attract the notice of Monseigneur."

"I am not such a woman, Madame," replied Aïssé, haughtily.

The Royal Garden-Party

"No. But you observe the Rose of Galistan has only to bloom among the garish blossoms of Paris to make the greatest in the land desire to pluck it."

Madame de Tencin's ironic glance and smile included Richelieu, who was following them, all ears now. Aïssé, not behind in the language of her world, answered, also with a look at Richelieu.

"But even the greatest in the land must not steal flowers. Here is M. le Duc de Richelieu, who may be punished for the theft when Madame de Berry sees this in my hand," and she held up the spray of lilies.

Said Richelieu: "I will wager that I get Riom to make my peace with *La Joufflotte*." And Madame de Tencin struck in, addressing Aïssé:

"Come, *pétite fleur*, this duke is very well able to take care of himself. Meanwhile, the greater duke waits."

Now they are close to the Regent and d'Argenson. Monseigneur, manifestly eager, advances a step. Richelieu sidles off to spread hints as to the new favourite. D'Argenson steps aside. The presentation takes place.

Aïssé drops her deepest curtsey, the Regent extends a shapely hand, and she, in placing the tips of her fingers beneath it for the regulation kiss, finds herself raised in a strong grasp and by a very courtly movement.

The Regent, in his turn, bows low. He pays Mademoiselle Aïssé the compliment of declaring that but for this fortunate moment he might have left his daughter's entertainment having missed its most attractive feature.

To which Mademoiselle Aïssé replies that she is overwhelmed by His Royal Highness's graciousness and is deeply honoured at being bidden by Madame la Duchesse de Berry to her entertainment to-day. Then the Regent and Mademoiselle Aïssé move slightly apart, all eyes now bent upon them.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

D'Argenson turns to Madame de Tencin, and demands with brutal directness:

" *You* planned this—what's your game? "

Madame de Tencin shrugs her graceful shoulders.

" My friend, you are so severe on all the foibles of humanity that you suspect some deep-laid plot everywhere. May not one woman perform a deed of simple kindness for another without being actuated by a base motive? "

" Not *you*," answers d'Argenson, roughly. " You never performed a kindness without the object of benefiting yourself." Some women may act disinterestedly, but not *you* ! "

CHAPTER V

EMILIE INTERVENES

THE various stages of Madame de Tencin's plot required considerable management ; and even in those days, when an affair of the heart blossomed in the morning and bore fruit at eve, this particular one took some time for its growth.

To Madame de Tencin's chagrin, delays arose, partly through difficulties in the administration of Law's system, which claimed the Regent's attention, partly through Aissé's retiring ways and the fact of her being outside the Court circle ; also because the Ambassador had a relapse and she was obliged to stay more at home than usual. Likewise because Philippe d'Orléans admired the girl too sincerely to take her captive by force, as he might have been tempted to do had she been either an unprotected actress or an unprincipled duchess.

This Madame de Tencin fully recognised. She rightly judged that the Regent was too much of a gentleman to press his attentions without due encouragement. Thus, in order to bring the Duke and Aissé together in an apparently natural way, she was obliged to manœuvre diplomatically.

Not for one moment—after the presentation at the Duchesse de Berry's garden-party—did she lose sight of the object she had in view. She regarded Aissé merely as a pawn to be pushed forward in order to secure the position of larger pieces—her brother and herself. She had their interests to serve. Aissé being *dévoté*, her influence on the side of the Church was important just

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

then, and Madame de Tencin was working for a cardinal's hat for her brother the Abbé, who, however, was astute enough to realise that until he had successfully helped Dubois into the red hat he could not hope to wear one himself.

Then there were her sister and brother-in-law's interests to be considered—in so far as they affected her own, and that was mainly through John Law and the *Compagnie des Indes*—in manipulating the shares of which the influence of the Regent, if secured by Aïssé, would count to Madame de Tencin for a very great deal.

It was true, as Monseigneur himself had shown Madame de Tencin, that he did not permit women to interfere in affairs of State. But Madame knew well enough that the Regent would certainly be amenable to feminine influence, provided it were employed adroitly and apparently undesignedly. Witness the power for good exercised over him by his early love, the Comtesse d'Argenson (Mademoiselle de Séry), witness too the power of Emilie the actress, before whom it was known that the Regent had on one or two occasions held a conference on important public matters with his counsellors of State.

Madame de Tencin's first operations began therefore with Aïssé herself. She made much of the girl and invented opportunities for taking her about in such a clever manner that it was impossible for Aïssé to refuse. She even enlisted the sympathy of the Ambassador, representing to him that Aïssé looked pale, that to receive visitors at home was not sufficiently stimulating, that she needed social variety; in short, that she—Madame de Tencin—desired nothing better than to act as Aïssé's chaperone at the entertainments of certain important ladies with whom she was acquainted. The Ambassador was taken in completely. He thanked Madame de Tencin for her kindness to his child, as he

Emilie Intervenes

now invariably called Aïssé, and persuaded the girl to take advantage of it.

Madame de Tencin next developed a fervid intimacy with Madame de Parabère. That emotional lady fell into the trap. Madame de Tencin confessed that she was anxious to arrange a marriage for Aïssé and begged Madame de Parabère's assistance. And as Aïssé herself liked the frivolous, good-hearted Comtesse, Madame de Tencin found no particular difficulty in inducing Aïssé to accompany her frequently to Madame de Parabère's town house and—all unsuspectingly on the part of both hostess and girl-guest—to Madame de Parabère's beautiful pavilion on the banks of the Seine—Asnières.

For there Madame de Tencin knew Aïssé was most likely to meet the Regent.

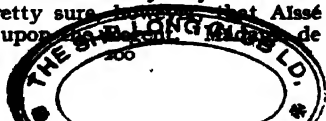
The Duc d'Orléans had bought the place from the Marquis d'Argenson—a tiny old château almost surrounded by water—and had transformed the dilapidated old house into a *maison de fantasie* of the kind Watteau loved to paint. It was, in fact, decorated by Watteau, his pupil Boucher and the famous Lancret—medallions of flowers in the ceilings, garlanded shepherdesses over the doors, cupids on swings of roses suspended as it were from blue clouds, all in keeping. This gem of a country place Monseigneur had presented to Madame de Parabère, and here she entertained him with anxious care for his amusement but with an entire lack of ceremonial. This was what he liked. Often when the *maîtresse en titre* was in residence at Asnières he would have himself ferried across and join her in moonlight boating-parties, supping afterwards in the pavilion, without giving any notice of his coming.

On more than one occasion Aïssé found herself in the Regent's company at Asnières. Madame de Tencin observed that he watched her continuously, though in Madame de Parabère's presence he did not pay Aïssé

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

any conspicuous attention. Aïssé, still unconscious of having attracted him, admired and liked the Regent. It would have been hardly possible for a woman not to like and admire Monseigneur if she were drawn into close proximity with him. A few other opportunities occurred for their meetings. At the opera Mademoiselle Aïssé was distinguished by his notice, and Madame de Parabère, not being there, was duly informed of the fact. She, secure of her empire, only laughed. But a little later on, when again the Regent met Aïssé at the Paris house of Madame de Parabère—and this time would not permit her to withdraw—Madame de Parabère's suspicions were aroused. That evening a stormy scene took place between the Comtesse and the Regent. She accused him of being in love with Aïssé, and when he did not deny it, she said things that were certainly indiscreet. But where her emotions were concerned Madame de Parabère was often indiscreet. She made the Regent extremely angry. From his manner she felt certain that he had serious intentions with regard to Aïssé. A more or less definite rupture ensued.

Now Madame de Parabère never resented her Royal lover's minor infidelities—his *liaisons* with actresses and ballet-dancers like La Souris—one of his favourites—nor even the more formidable Emilie. For in the easy morality of Parisian great ladies, low-born women like La Souris and Emilie were not to be taken into account. It was the mission of such creatures to be the toys of the great. Madame de Parabère would have scorned to show jealousy of Emilie. But the case was altogether different with Aïssé. This girl, notwithstanding her debatable position, was too near Madame de Parabère's own social level not to be regarded with uneasiness. Madame de Parabère—not by any means an astute woman—felt pretty sure, however, that Aïssé herself had no designs upon the Regent. Mademoiselle de Tencin



Emilie Intervenes

and Madame de Parabère were unconsciously agreed upon one point—that Aissé was too great a fool to plot for her own advantage. Madame de Parabère guessed that Aissé was probably oblivious of the Regent's admiration. Equally she guessed that it was patent to Madame de Tencin. Suddenly she began to see through Madame de Tencin's game. Determined to thwart it, she cast about for the best means of doing so without demeaning herself by appealing for aid in her own circle.

An inspiration came to her. She knew Emilie slightly. Years ago the actress had been a poor seamstress supporting a widowed mother, and the two were almost starving when, by an accident, they came under Madame de Parabère's notice.

With all her faults Madame de Parabère had the kindest heart possible. She had rescued Emilie and her mother in their distress, and had therefore a strong claim on the actress's gratitude. Afterwards Emilie's talent for classical stage-dancing, then in vogue, had been discovered, and with her beauty had placed her in affluence. That was after her mother's death. So long as her mother lived Emilie had remained virtuous. The actress had known but two passions—one was love for her mother, the other her love for Philippe d'Orléans.

Hence Madame de Parabère decided to employ Emilie as a weapon in her own contest. It was a long time since she had seen Emilie, who had left the stage on becoming the Regent's mistress. She knew, however, where Emilie lived, and despatched an urgent note by hand bidding the woman come and see her.

That evening Madame de Parabère was supping alone in her house in the Rue de Provence. It was a fragrant little supper—people of fashion did not at that period feed grossly as in previous French reigns. There

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

was a steaming *bouillon* with minute savoury fish floating about it, and partaken of with an accompaniment of fresh green parsley and olives. This was followed by some small fried condiments of the nature of fishes' roes, served with crisp *croûtons*. A salad came next, eaten with eggs. Then a glass of strong jelly, with which Madame drank golden wine out of a long narrow goblet of chased green glass with a design and monogram upon it.

There were no servants in the room. Madame preferred, when she had not any guests, that everything should be placed ready so that she could help herself as she pleased. She was a nervous type of woman, and the continual presence of servants—automata though they were—irritated her. To-night she was highly wrought and could not have endured it.

The Comtesse sat at a table in her own boudoir—a small room, the walls panelled in dark wood with paintings set into the panels. A screen of tapestry, in designs of Watteau figures, was a conspicuous object and formed a background to the lovely Comtesse. She wore a gown of deep orange brocade cut very low on the shoulders, opening over a quilted satin petticoat of pale lemon colour, and with a long train that twisted itself round the legs of her chair as she sat at the table, which had no hanging cloth, so that one could see her small arched feet shod in quilted yellow satin slippers with gold heels. Gold was the prevailing note. She had a long gold chain set with precious stones, looped about her bodice and bearing a double gold-rimmed eye-glass. From her left wrist hung a gold vinaigrette in the shape of a ball, from which she occasionally took a sniff. Beside her lay a lace handkerchief and a gold-spangled fan tipped with gilt feathers. Gold-dust powdered her dark hair, which was elaborately dressed and ornamented with loops of black velvet and diamonds. Later on she was going to a great reception and had

Emilie Intervenes

dressed early, partly to impress Emilie, who had, once for a short time, been her waiting-maid.

Though Madame's meal was dainty and elegantly served she did not partake of it in a very refined manner. She ate with her elbows on the table, leaning forward and swallowing her soup rapidly, first tucking a napkin into the breast of her gown. She helped herself to olives and so forth with her fingers, and drank with her mouth full, enjoying the repast in pretty *gourmande* fashion, but with her mind evidently pre-occupied.

She had almost finished when a lackey came to tell her that a lady below wished to see her. The lady had given no name, but Madame de Parabère easily divined that it was Emilie. Indeed, the lackey knew Emilie well enough, and wondered what his mistress could possibly want with an actress whom all the world knew was the Regent's light-o'-love. The Marquise directed that she should be shown into the next room—the *salon*, which was more imposing, and would give the *grande dame* a better advantage. She went in there herself to await her visitor. "See that no one disturbs us," she added to the footman.

It is a curious scene—this of the two women.

Madame de Parabère has seated herself at an *escritoire*, a finely-chased piece of furniture with thin, bowed legs, ormolu mounts and slender beadings of metal. Madame de Parabère's hand moves restlessly among some sheets of paper and a bundle of quill pens. She does not even look round when the lackey admits Emilie.

The woman who has entered is plainly dressed in a long cloak of thinnish dark violet material, a soft, graceful cloak lined with cream-coloured silk a shade or two deeper than her complexion. The hood of the cloak frames a pale, oval face of the gentle, rather melancholy type, with dark eyes, large, wistful, searching, finely-

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

defined brows and sweeping lashes, a well-shaped, delicate nose, a small pointed chin, and firmly-moulded lips, full, red and slightly pouting. Her stage training has given her a peculiar grace of movement and a certain dignity of carriage, which last is also temperamental. And yet in contrast with that other—a flower of the French aristocracy—a marquise of the old *régime*, which is saying everything, the actress is unmistakably a woman of the people.

Emilie's cloak falls back from her shoulders, showing a garb of almost Puritanical simplicity, also in contrast with the gorgeous attire of Madame de Parabère: a dress of soft stuff, blue-grey in hue, falling in straight lines without the fashionable paniers, a little fine lace drawn over the bosom, and lace ruffles at the elbow sleeves; no jewels or any kind of ornamentation.

Emilie had curtsied low on entering, and receiving no recognition of her curtsy drew herself up rather indignantly and waited. Madame de Parabère, though with her back turned, could observe her actions in a mirror set above the *escritoire*. The Comtesse at length turned nonchalantly, not rising, but merely inclining her head in a cold, slightly contemptuous gesture.

"You have come then. That is well."

Emilie made a stiff inclination.

"I am honoured by the command of Madame la Comtesse."

Madame la Comtesse laughed harshly.

"It is no question of honour, my good Emilie, but merely of ordinary kindness to one in whom I once took some interest."

Emilie looked surprised but answered nothing. Madame de Parabère, her face turned to the mirror, spoke rapidly, as though she were not considering her words.

"You are being wronged and you are worthy of

Emilie Intervenes

better treatment. It vexes me to see this, for I am still rather interested in you."

"Madame la Comtesse is very gracious. I should hardly have thought that Madame remembered me."

Madame la Comtesse shrugged; her hands moved unceasingly among the pens and papers. "Why not? At one time I was able to be of some assistance to you and to your mother."

Tears came into Emilie's eyes.

"Madame la Comtesse has no need to remind me of her past goodness. My grateful prayers are always for her. But that is a long time ago."

Madame de Parabère turned on her chair, shook her train away from its feet, and surveyed Emilie in a long, scrutinising gaze from top to toe.

"Well, you do not seem to have needed my assistance during this time," she said significantly.

Emilie's head drooped and a blush came into her cheeks. She stammered "N-no, Madame."

The de Parabère went on, laughing maliciously:

"Report has it that since His Royal Highness the Regent smiled upon the dancer she has wanted for nothing."

Emilie's head drooped lower and the blush deepened, but she remained silent.

Madame de Parabère continued insultingly:

"*Eh bien!* It is cheaper and more agreeable to be the plaything of a prince than to sew for one's living?"

Emilie raised her head, her neck reared itself, her eyes darkened.

"Madame!" she said indignantly, "did you bring me here to tell me that—that—" her voice faltered.

"That you love Monseigneur better than he loves you? That—and other things. Have patience, Emilie."

"In truth I need it, Madame."

"Come, do not mount the tragic stilts. I tell you that I brought you here to do you a kindness."

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

Emilie bowed satirically.

"Show me the kindness, Madame, that I may thank you."

Madame de Parabère turned again to the *escritoire* and fidgeted anew with the pens. She took up a quill, bit it, held it to her rosy lips, as, leaning forward, she looked at Emilie with an expression of cynical raillery.

"I am coming to it. Tell me—you love Philippe d'Orléans?"

A splendid light flashed into the actress's eyes.

"Why ask, Madame?"

"Because I have a reason for wishing to know. You observe, I did not ask you if you loved His Highness the Regent. Any woman in Paris is ready enough to do that."

Emilie replied with pathetic dignity:

"Surely Madame la Comtesse understands that while His Highness the Regent may purchase love, Philippe d'Orléans compels it."

Madame de Parabère blushed in her turn, but covered the blush with a laugh.

"Aptly answered, Emilie. Your wits have grown sharper since first I knew you. Is it His Highness the Regent or Philippe d'Orléans who has brightened your intelligence?"

Emilie maintained a stiff silence.

"In other words, has *your* love been bought or compelled? Is it the man or the prince?" mercilessly pursued the Marquise. "Report has it, Emilie, that you refused a sumptuous set of pearls from His Royal Highness. If that be true I conclude that you wished to give a proof of disinterested affection."

"Madame"—the girl began and halted, at once angry, uneasy, and at a loss to fathom the other's motive. "I do not know why you should question me in this manner—unless it be that report has not erred—in another direction."

Emilie Intervenes

"Report usually errs, Emilie, which is why I ask you if you are really disinterested," returned the Comtesse. "Come, let us understand each other. Rumour says that you love this man—not the Prince—and that this is why you do not flaunt pearls and diamonds in the face of envious rivals. For you have rivals, Emilie—La Souris, for instance. You are a fool if you do not know it."

Emilie made a sweeping gesture that conveyed but little. Madame de Parabère continued, with rasping gaiety that had an under-note of spite:

"You are not wise, my child, to refuse such gifts. A man values his mistress in proportion to what she costs him."

"Not Philippe d'Orléans, Madame."

"*Ma foi!* How should you know?" Madame de Parabère could not contain her scorn. "Have you the audacity to suppose that *you* are anything more to him than any other woman of the Opera? There, I did not mean to offend you." She pulled herself in under the flash of Emilie's eyes. "I believe you are a good girl, different from La Souris and the rest of them. Naturally I should not concern myself over that sort of creature. As for why I trouble myself about *you*, Emilie . . . truly the good God alone knows why He gave me a heart so inconceivably soft."

The lady touched her bosom lightly with her pretty jewelled hand. "I remember your poor mother, Emilie," she said suggestively, "in the garret where I found her."

Instantly Emilie was touched. She bent and kissed the Comtesse's hand.

"Ah! Madame, is it not to that great soft heart which the good God gave you that I owe a year at least of my adored mother's life?"

The Comtesse patted her hand.

"You are a good girl, Emilie—did I not say so? See

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

you then that this inconveniently large heart of mine leads me often into actions that are misunderstood, causes me to sacrifice myself to a sentiment—a duty. As when I nursed my husband, Monsieur the late Comte, at the risk of being disfigured for life. *Mon Dieu!* If I had taken the small-pox! What horror! But my heart did not let me think of that. And behold! when the good God bestows an inconvenient gift upon His children He protects them against its evil consequences."

Madame de Parabère rose for a minute and examined her face with an air of satisfaction in the mirror, then sat down again.

"So with you, my good Emilie."

"With me, Madame?"

"Truly I play the part of *le bon Dieu* in protecting you against your follies of sentiment. I have a feeling for you because you also have a large, soft heart. But above that I have a reason."

"A reason, Madame, for what?"

"For warning you. Understand well that it is nothing to me how His Highness chooses to amuse himself amongst you. My class does not ask questions about yours. But, as I said, I have a reason. I do not desire that a particular Church faction should have things all its own way. It is with the Jansenists that my sympathies run—you understand."

"No, Madame."

"Then listen. On that account, and perhaps on other accounts, I prefer that Monseigneur the Regent should cherish a serious attachment towards you, who have no political purpose to serve, than that he should be inveigled into the net of an ecclesiastical *intrigante*. Therefore I sent for you to acquaint you with your danger."

"Madame! You—you sent for me to warn me?"

"Precisely. Now, make the most of your oppor-

Emilie Intervenes

tunities. You are handsome . . . you are not devoid of intelligence." You have a charm . . . but, without doubt, a charm of a certain order."

The Comtesse put up her lorgnon and stared through it insolently at Emilie.

"Yes. You possess attractions. Nevertheless, my fine girl, you are mistaken if you think they have proved sufficiently powerful to chain the fickle heart of Philippe d'Orléans. He is false to you."

"False!" echoed the girl. "But, Madame—"

"I tell you that he is false to you, or if not yet, he soon will be. Unless you protect yourself against the thief who is waiting to steal your goods."

"Oh, Madame!" with a shrinking gesture and shiver.

"How can I call him mine? How can such a one as the first in the kingdom belong to a poor actress, who asks for nothing but to serve him in such manner as he will."

"Well, see to it that the servant be not dismissed at a moment's notice," said Madame de Parabère, not unkindly.

Emilie murmured deprecatingly.

"Oh! *la . . . la*," continued the Comtesse, "I do not speak of the half-dozen little affairs of the moment which bubble up to-day and are gone to-morrow. All the men are like that. I speak of the affair that lasts—the rare passion. It is the rare passion which Monseigneur has conceived for a girl who, strangely enough, somewhat resembles *you*, Emilie. It is so, now I come to observe the likeness."

"Resembles *me*!" The girl seemed only able to repeat her tormentor's last words. She staggered slightly—Madame de Parabère had not asked her to sit down—and threw her cloak further back, as though she felt suffocating. Her breast was heaving. Her brain was confused.

"Disinterested also. I do her that justice. And

The Romanice of Mademoiselle Aïssé

she admires the *man*. But she is *vrai* the heart of mine is dangerous; the more so because she is misunderstood, of those designing de Tencins." sentiment—a duty.

Emilie advanced a step, her hand Monsieur the late hood of her cloak dropping altogether for life. *Mon*

"Of whom is Madame speaking?" What horror!

"You know nothing then. I speak that. And be- Circassian — Mademoiselle Aïssé. The convenient gift Ambassador de Ferriol bought in Constantinople its evil who they say was the daughter of a Prince. And you have not heard of Mademoiselle Aïssé?" And ex-

"Si—si! The adopted sister of Messieurs d'Artois, the and Pont de Veyle? Yes, Madame, I have heard of Mademoiselle Aïssé."

The actress stood with hands clasped before her head raised, a keen, sharp look in her face. "Madame la Comtesse is sure of this?"

"Of a certainty. Should I have sent for you to tell you unless I had been sure?"

"Madame is very good," said Emilie, a note of doubt in her voice. Madame de Parabère looked at her with a cynical effrontery.

"You imagine that I am using you as a cat's-paw to pull the chestnuts from the fire? Think as you please, my good girl. But, *mon Dieu!* if our men must needs take mistresses, let them take from their own plot of earth. Monseigneur is safer in the arms of a good Frenchwoman like yourself than in those of an Eastern slave. There, I have no more to say. You must be your own watch-dog."

Madame de Parabère rose. Emilie stood eagerly gazing at the Comtesse, her chin up, her eyes bright, a determined look on her mouth, her hands clenched as they caught the cloak on either side of her hips.

"Madame! Madame!" she stammered. Then with a sudden movement she threw the cloak over her arm in a somewhat theatrical gesture, and springing forward,

Emilie Intervenes

tunities. You are, Madame de Parabère and kissed her of intelligence."

doubt, a charm of thank you, dear Madame? You have The Comtesse, that which I adore—my life and my through it insole, I will find the means in my own way.

"Yes. You may be in my own way?" fine girl, you are, I meddle not in Philippe d'Orléans's sufficiently pained Madame de Parabère, haughtily. d'Orléans. In my caprice to do an old servant a passing

"False. Make of it such use as you please."

"I tell Madame . . . I am too happy . . . I feared. soon with the thought, Madame, but report has said this Madame la Comtesse herself is not indifferent to "seigneur."

"*Ma foi!* You place me on a level with yourself!" Madame de Parabère twitched her skirt away angrily. Then she laughed, her voice making a scornful ripple of sound. "*Voilà!* I should be offended, I suppose. Go and say that to Madame de Sabran or Madame d'Averne and you would find yourself kicked to the door by their lackeys. As for me, I bear you no malice, Emilie; I wish you success in your task. For the rest, it is nothing—nothing to me. Now go. Madame la Duchesse Fitz-James gives a ball to-night."

The Comtesse rang the bell. Emilie rose to her feet and drew on the hood of her cloak. Making a formal obeisance she retired. Madame de Parabère stood for a minute or two at the escritoire, the quill to her mouth, thinking absorbedly.

Then, glancing up at herself in the mirror, she laughed and tossed the quill down as if she were flinging a gauntlet to Fate.

CHAPTER VI

MADAME DE TENCIN OFFERS THE APPLE

FROM this time onward Emilie shadowed Mademoiselle Aissé.

That was not a difficult matter, for Aissé went about a good deal, and was easily recognisable, apart from her distinctive appearance, by having her own chair and liveried attendants. The difficulty was finding opportunity for speech with her, for after studying her rival's appearance Emilie had decided that in direct dealing with Aissé lay her best chance of success. But she wished to be quite certain of her ground. So far she had never seen the Regent and Aissé in each other's company.

Naturally Emilie's first idea was to use her woman's wiles to obtain from the Regent himself some confirmation of Madame de Parabère's story. But Philippe d'Orléans was emphatically a gentleman in that he never gave away a woman. Thus Emilie failed in her attempt. It appears, too, that she saw very little of the Regent during this period. Probably, obsessed by desire for Aissé, d'Orléans avoided the actress. All the more, because in his own fashion of caring—which did not include fidelity—he was really fond of Emilie, and therefore could not in the circumstances face her with an easy mind. His conscience—if he possessed a conscience—a doubtful supposition—must have pricked him sometimes in regard to Emilie. He likewise had remarked the resemblance in type between Aissé and Emilie; one of the reasons, perhaps, why on the first occasion of their meeting he had been so much struck

Madame De Tencin Offers the Apple

by Aïssé, for both women must have reminded him of his earlier and deeper love, the tender and noble-minded Mademoiselle de Séry.

Here again one may point the illustration of Philippe d'Orléans's strange duality. From youth his heart had swayed like a pendulum between two opposite kinds of women. On one side the *filles d'Opéra* and such like—Desmarés, Florence and the rest, who, when he was Duc de Chartres, had made a scandal of the Palais Royal. On the other, about the same period, his deep and longer-lived devotion to Mademoiselle de Séry. Then after his marriage to Mademoiselle de Blois—counted as an *affaire de convenance*, no more—the same drama re-enacted itself. Again *petits soupers*, the *filles d'Opéra*, La Souris among them, and the high-born *cocottes*—La Parabère, d'Averne and the other mistresses—representing the needs of the flesh, while Emilie, and now Aïssé, embodied the demand of his higher self.

These two types were complements of the two distinct personalities resident in the form of Philippe d'Orléans.

Madame de Tencin was quite unaware of the Emilie development, and would not have deemed Madame de Parabère capable of originating so subtle a counter-move. But the two plotters had a passage-of-arms after the Comtesse's discovery of the Regent's infatuation for Aïssé, and following on this Madame de Tencin was under the necessity of taking a fresh initiative. Clearly the thing to be done was to transfer the scene of operations to her own house—the Hôtel de Ferriol being out of the question. But Aïssé was not in the habit of frequenting the joint abode of Abbé de Tencin—Archbishop of Embrun he was now—and his sister; therefore Claudine did not find it easy to decoy the girl thither. Aided however by the Ambassador's anxiety for Aïssé's amusement, and by the equally unconscious co-operation of Aïssé's many friends, Madame baited her trap

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

cleverly, and was careful that on Aïssé's visits there should be no one present obnoxious to her.

As for her brother the Abbé, he was kept out of sight, Claudine being perfectly aware of Aïssé's distrust of that old hypocrite.

"After her early experience the silly girl shrinks from all men who make their admiration too evident," she said. "You do not play the ascetic convincingly enough to allay her suspicions."

So the Abbé was hustled out of his own *salon*. But Claudine confided her scheme to him. It was her usual custom to take counsel with him—if that could be so called—for it is improbable that he would have opposed whatever she planned. At all events, he did not venture to do so now, but submitted—though somewhat morosely—to her dictates.

The brother and sister then had Dubois to reckon with. But Claudine was quite as well able to manage Dubois, who had indeed set them a luminous example and played his own game skilfully in former years in manœuvring the marriage between his pupil d'Orléans and the king's daughter by Madame de Montespan. In so doing the ex-tutor had strengthened his hold over the future Regent and had considerably enriched himself. Now, by luck and the favour of royalty, Dubois stood in the first rank, and Abbé de Tencin had been clever enough to see from the beginning that in working with and for Dubois's interests he was working for himself. Had de Tencin been born a rich man as well as an aristocrat he might have pitted himself against the plebeian Dubois. As it was, he had always deliberately played second fiddle to Dubois because it was the best policy for himself and his sister. This was well understood between the two Abbés when they made women their pawns in the game of statecraft.

Thus, Dubois duly propitiated by Claudine, the Abbé de Tencin had no grounds for contesting his

Madame De Tencin Offers the Apple

sister's scheme. though he by no means relished the suggestion that Monseigneur should be allotted all rights in the fair Circassian.

This old wolf in sheep's clothing had certainly cherished the hope of one day seizing this delectable lamb. So far, however, there had never occurred an opportunity for him to do so. Aïssé's instinctive distrust of the Abbé made her avoid being alone with him. The Ambassador had had a notion of the Abbé's views, though no hint was ever given by either man on the subject. But sometimes as the Ambassador lay helpless on his couch, with Aïssé by his side, he would meet the Abbé's eyes, and each felt that the other understood. The Ambassador read behind the Abbé's priestly suavity, while the Abbé knew what was meant by the Ambassador's ironic smile when he kept his hand on Aïssé's shoulder or dismissed her from the room altogether. So it was that this helpless log of humanity—once her greatest terror—was now the girl's surest protector. Though careful to treat the Abbé with the respect due to his ecclesiastical office, Aïssé always breathed more freely when he was absent. Thus she was lured a second and a third time to Madame de Tencin's, and each time she was watched thither by Emilie.

It was a pretty game of spy on all sides.

D'Orléans had never been on visiting terms with the de Tencin set. Claudine, however, achieved her opportunity. By aid of d'Argenson she contrived to be present at an entertainment given to the Prince Regent by a great lady for whom the Minister of Police had done a good turn.

Seeing that Aïssé did not accompany her, d'Orléans's impulse was to avoid Madame de Tencin. She guessed his annoyance and exulted in it. For her part, she kept at first markedly out of his way. When at last she placed herself in his path he could not refrain from

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

inquiring after her "charming niece." Madame answered diplomatically, spurring his interest. "Aïssé," she said, "by choice led a somewhat secluded life. The hurly-burly of Parisian society did not appeal to her. She was romantic, her soul soared above the commonplace world. It had, in truth, been hard to induce her—great as was the honour—to attend Her Highness the Duchesse de Berry's garden-party. Only an overwhelming desire to meet one of Madame la Duchesse's exalted guests had overcome Aïssé's natural reserve and timidity."

"Ah! Mademoiselle Aïssé had doubtless a strong desire to meet His Imperial Majesty Peter of Russia," said the Regent, with an anxiety he could not conceal.

"Your Royal Highness is strangely unperceptive, if I may be pardoned for saying so," rejoined Madame de Tencin, archly. "Surely you can have no doubt as to who is the exalted personage for whom Mademoiselle Aïssé has always entertained so profound an admiration?"

The Regent laughed consciously. He threw out a tentative suggestion as to the possibility of a future meeting. Was it likely that Mademoiselle Aïssé might be persuaded to sup—under Madame de Tencin's protection, of course—in the informal atmosphere of the Little Apartments?

The ex-nun looked at the Regent through her half-closed eyes in a manner that left small doubt as to her full understanding of the situation. She laughed, too, and curtsied.

"Your Royal Highness is too gracious, but I have not forgotten that my sex suffers from chronic indigestion owing to our grandmother Eve's indulgence in unsuitable diet; Aïssé's acquaintance with M. le Serpent is not sufficient to warrant her acceptance of the apple—even in the seductive atmosphere of the Little Apartments."

"Is that so?" said the Regent, with a searching

Madame De Tencin Offers the Apple

look. "Mademoiselle Aïssé has then never tasted of the Serpent's apple? In truth, Madame, one could scarcely suppose otherwise after seeing her sweet face."

"Ah, Monseigneur, Aïssé is a paradox, an enigma. And the word of the enigma no one appears likely to divine — unless," went on Madame de Tencin, audaciously, "it be that your Royal Highness himself should choose the rôle of a new *Œdipus*."

The Regent frowned. Lagrange Chancel had published an abominable philippic of which he had taken no notice. Voltaire, with incredible audacity, had written, and had performed before the Court, his *Œdipe*, on which the Regent had complimented him—for it was not Philippe d'Orléans's habit to show comprehension of scurrilous attacks. By that frown, however, Madame de Tencin, who had spoken thoughtlessly, saw that he remembered, and she hastened to cover her slip.

"Yes, a paradox—an anomaly! Your Highness may be aware that Aïssé—the daughter of a Circassian prince—as a child was exposed for sale in the Constantinople slave-market, and but for the grace of God and the intervention of M. l'Ambassadeur de Ferriol would now in all probability have been the favoured odalisque of an Eastern harem. Nevertheless, Aïssé's purity remains without a stain. All Paris knows that she resisted the claims of her purchaser, and has by that power of stainless purity transformed the passion of a master into the blameless affection of a father."

Madame de Tencin paused.

"And yet it seems a strange thing," said the Regent, who was listening attentively, "that so beautiful a girl should be satisfied with such temperate emotion. One finds it hard to conceive that *la belle Circassienne* is incapable of passion."

"But no, Monseigneur, it is that the ideal lover has not yet offered himself—numerous as are my young

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

friend's suitors. Aïssé is, as I have said, romantic, fastidious, vowed to an ideal."

Again Madame de Tencin waited, studying the effect of her words. She saw that every one of them had struck a corresponding note in the man. His melancholy eyes gleamed with that curious searching expression which seemed to reveal the soul behind the senses. He, too, had cherished ideals; he, too, had visions of a pure and lasting love. Might not this be the elevating influence, the complete satisfaction of body and spirit for which he had always longed—had found in his youth, as he believed, only to lose it—and of which the pale reflection had attracted him to the actress Emilie?

Madame de Tencin resumed impulsively, as if compelled to an indiscreet candour.

"And yet I have good reason to feel certain that Aïssé, in spite of her apparent coldness, is capable of passionate attachment to—the prince of her dreams."

"And such a one—he exists, Madame?" the Regent asked, with the diffidence of a young lover.

"Till lately I had not suspected it, Monseigneur. Now I am certain that there is one man—the most highly-placed in France—who has the power to turn our pure and ice-like Aïssé into glowing flame."

The flattery was gross, its application unmistakably pointed, yet Philippe d'Orléans, for all his susceptibility, was not a fool. He hesitated a moment, then said:

"This highly-placed person should consider himself fortunate were it true that he had inspired a *disinterested* sentiment in the heart of one so lovely."

Madame de Tencin made an eloquent gesture.

"Monseigneur doubts the disinterestedness of a sentiment towards—shall we say—a lover so highly placed as himself? He has only to know this sweet Oriental flower better than he does at present to be convinced that rank, riches, dignity count as nothing to her. I have it from her own lips that Aïssé will never

Madame De Tencin Offers the Apple

give herself save where her heart has acknowledged its lord—be that lord prince or peasant. If Monseigneur desires an opportunity to assure himself of this I can arrange that the opportunity be forthcoming."

Philippe d'Orléans reddened, and answered with slight haughtiness:

"I do not bargain with intermediaries, Madame. In such affairs my dealings are—as those of a man of honour should be—with the lady herself."

Madame de Tencin drew back with an offended air.

"Your Royal Highness has entirely misunderstood my amiable suggestion. Doubtless Monseigneur can find his own opportunity for plucking the fairest exotic which blooms in France without my supplying the key of the hothouse."

Madame de Tencin curtsied again as if asking permission to withdraw. The Duke detained her by a gesture

"Pardon, Madame, but may I ask if you have the assurance from Mademoiselle Aissé herself that she is not indifferent to me?"

Madame de Tencin laughed sweetly and veiled her eyes in affectation of discreet reluctance.

"Nay, Monseigneur, have I not said enough. Would it be womanly to unveil the sanctuary of a girl's heart? Is it not my duty to protect her so far as lies in my power?"

"Enough, Madame—indeed enough!" exclaimed the Duke. "Your delicacy does you honour. But am I brute to break a butterfly or crush a flower? Make me an opportunity unsuspected by Mademoiselle Aissé and I will discover the truth for myself."

Madame de Tencin gazed at him as if overwhelmed by his magnanimity.

"Now I realise that Aissé's intuition cannot be deceived. There speaks her hero."

They laid their scheme together. It was arranged

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

that the Regent should come informally to Madame de Tencin's house on a day when he should be apprised that Aïssé was going to visit her. He would see the girl alone. She would be taken unprepared. The rest was in His Highness's own hands.

So it happened that one afternoon, not long afterwards, a sedan chair of unobtrusive appearance, but extremely well-appointed, its bearers in a livery of grey with touches of cherry colour, entered the square in which was the house occupied by the Abbé de Tencin and his sister. It was the chair that the Ambassador had provided for Mademoiselle Aïssé.

There was a plot of garden in the middle of the square with some large trees that had seats under them; also shrubs of syringa, guelder roses and such like, and an old-world border against a still older grey wall at one end. The garden had formed part of an almost feudal demesne of ancient Paris and had been taken up for building purposes. It was a quiet square tenanted by persons of note. The Abbé de Tencin's house was one of the smallest and had a sombre, ecclesiastical look, the windows flat set in heavy frames with pointed tops, the door of dark oak studded with iron and with a thick iron bell-pull and antique knocker. A flight of worn, shallow steps approached it between a squat pedestal lamp on one side and a torch extinguisher on the other.

The chair was set down in front of it, and the bearers closed round the occupant as she got out, one opening the door, another offering a shoulder, another guarding the step. Thus it was not easy for a woman—a tall, stately figure in a violet cloak—who had been following the chair on foot at a little distance to get more than a glimpse of Aïssé.

This woman just saw Aïssé sweep across the narrow pavement, but the door was swung open almost before the bell-pull was touched. Evidently someone inside

Madame De Tencin Offers the Apple

had been on watch for the visitor. Aïssé paused a moment to give some orders to her servants and then the big door closed upon her.

The woman in the long violet cloak drew up its silken hood till it almost concealed her face. Then she retreated within the garden, where she took up her position on a seat beneath a spreading tree. She saw the bearers go off with the empty sedan chair, and inferred from this that their mistress would be some time in the house. But patience was a quality that this woman practised. She decided to wait for Aïssé's emergence and then seek for a favourable chance to accost her.

Meantime, within the de Tencin house, Aïssé was making her way upstairs—wide, shallow stairs lighted by a window of stained glass, through which, as Aïssé mounted, the westerly sun cast crimson stains like blood upon the dark oak panelling and, as she passed, upon the form of the girl herself.

Though a day late in spring, the weather was cold that year, and Aïssé had come rather warmly clad. She wore a straight-falling robe of a soft brown material, the folds of which clung about her feet, that were shod in bronze high-heeled shoes—Aïssé had very pretty arched feet. She also wore her favourite-shaped head-gear, in which was a deep crimson rose, and the snood confining her hair beneath it was kept in place by large gold-headed pins. Her usual shawl wrap, heavily fringed, and to-day of a deep cream colour, draped the upper part of her form. On entering she had thrown it backward, showing the front of her robe turned back with a contrasting shade of old rose over a long pearl-coloured waistcoat ruffled about the neck with delicate lace. Over all hung her gold pearl-studded chain. Her arms were bare to the elbow, where full lace ruffles fell from them. As she went up she took off her long wrinkled gloves. In those times the gloves were more

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

clumsily stitched than now, and women were glad to remove them on going indoors. Aïssé's arms were satiny-looking, creamy of hue and dimpled, the hands beautifully shaped with dimpled backs, small pointed fingers, and nails tinted and polished in the Oriental mode. Hers was an elegant and picturesque figure, moving with a graceful gliding movement and dignified carriage of the head.

She had gone up swiftly in advance of the servant who had admitted her and now paused on the parquet landing outside the *salon*. The servant came forward. He was dressed in a dark monastic-looking livery and had a deprecatory Jesuitic air. There was an ecclesiastical touch about all the de Tencin surroundings. The man bowed obsequiously and delivered a message from his mistress. "Madame de Tencin was desolated. She had been sent for suddenly to visit a dying friend. Would Mademoiselle excuse her for a short time and await her return, which might be now at any moment?"

Aïssé smiled and nodded graciously. Her ways were always pleasant with servants and her own maid adored her. Nevertheless she was a little dismayed at the man's message and, within her heart, prayed that M. l'Abbé might not be at home. On this point the servant reassured her by his florid apologies for the absence of his master likewise. "But if Mademoiselle could amuse herself for a few minutes in solitude in the *salon*?"

He ushered Aïssé along the landing, into a large room that had three windows looking out into the square garden and with a great carved fireplace in which a small wood fire was burning. After replenishing the fire, he retired with further obsequious bows.

Facing the window side of the room was an opening into an ante-chamber approached by another door from the landing and closed in with heavy velvet curtains. Aïssé peered through these and satisfied

Madame De Tencin Offers the Apple

herself that the room was empty. Now she went to one of the windows and gazed out. The square garden appeared vacant, except for a woman in a dark violet mantle, who was seated on one of the benches, partially screened by a shrub of blooming guelder roses. She sat in a dejected attitude, and it struck Aïssé, from the glimpse she got of her face, that the woman's cheeks were as white as the flowers behind her.

Aïssé wondered vaguely who this woman was and of what she could be thinking. But she dismissed the question, and, moving to the great open fireplace, examined its heavy oak carving and mediæval-looking brass mountings. Supporting the narrow high ledge above the opening were gryphon's heads, semi-human, grotesque, and with a leering Satanic smile upon their full lips. Aïssé turned her eyes from these with an involuntary gesture of repugnance, for that leering look reminded her of a similar expression she had sometimes seen on the handsome face of the Abbé de Tencin.

In spite of the season Aïssé felt suddenly chilly, and seated herself on a broad fender-stool in front of the hearth. She loosened her wrap, the weight of which oppressed her, and cast it back from her shoulders, so that it fell in a heap on the stool round her as she leaned forward to the fire.

There were blue and violet flames shooting from the logs which the servant had put on, and Aïssé stared at them in a fascinated way. As she sat gazing at the flames she thought dreamily of her own life. The late spring-blooming seemed to have stirred her to vague yearnings and also vague repinings.

She thought of the curious vicissitudes of her career, of how lonely she was in soul, and of how few people there were, notwithstanding her many friends and acquaintances, for whom she really cared.

De Bournonville, the good Berthier de Sauvigny, all

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

the rest of her many admirers, were merely units in an unimportant crowd. It was impossible for her to reciprocate the attachment of any one of them. And her friendships among women were not in those days of a satisfying order. She had not yet met Madame de Calandrini, who was to exercise so powerful an influence over the closing years of her life. And so far she had only a conventional acquaintance with Mesdames du Deffand and de Parabère—those two who were to come so loyally to her aid at the last.

Her dear Marquise de Villette seemed now absorbed in the affairs of my lord Bolingbroke, who was always staying at Marcilly, and neither of them came much to Paris. There was, of course, the Ambassador, and Aïssé felt ever the deepest sense of pity and of gratitude towards her adopted father, who in this new phase of their relation never sought to be anything to her save a father. But that filial affection did not by any means fill the void. It is true that d'Argental remained her devoted brother; d'Argental, however, had been for some time away serving an apprenticeship in the arts of chivalry as a page of honour in the great house of the Duc de Biron—a common custom among gentlemen of position in those days. Pont de Veyle, who needed no such lessons in manners, was often absent also, attending in his father's place to things at Château Pont de Veyle. Besides, Aïssé had never been in the same close touch with Antoine de Pont de Veyle as with his brother, Charles d'Argental.

In one respect he affected Aïssé, for his friendship with his aunt, Madame de Tencin, and his frequent presence, when in Paris, at her house made it difficult for Aïssé to avoid going there. In truth she had taken herself severely to task for uncharitableness in the matter of her dislike to Madame de Ferriol's sister, and it had been arranged that she was to spend this afternoon with Madame de Tencin. Yet the

Madame De Tencin Offers the Apple

girl could never overcome her dread and dislike of the ex-nun.

As she sat there dreaming by the fire the minutes slowly passed and still Madame de Tencin did not arrive. At last a faint sound of the shutting of a door, of voices below, of a step on the stair, came to her.

She waited expectantly, but no one appeared. She looked round nervously. The doors were fast shut; there was not a stir of the curtains nor a sign of other occupancy. All was silence again, and after a few minutes she reassured herself. Turning back to the fire she leaned her chin on her hand, and stared anew at the dancing flames, falling once more into reverie.

Little she guessed that a pair of eyes was watching her between the aperture of the curtains—eyes burning with admiration and desire. She sat unconscious when the curtains parted revealing a noble figure—that of the First Gentleman of France.

CHAPTER VII

HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS

A MAN'S two hands were laid on Aissé's shoulder. Gentle as was the touch, it made the girl start violently. She wrenched herself away and sprang to her feet, turning to confront, not the medium-sized, rather stout figure in an ecclesiastical habit, with the smooth, suave face that inspired her with dislike and fear, but a tall, splendid personage, royal of bearing, richly though quietly dressed, with an unobtrusive order, which he wore naturally, giving, even if she had not recognised him, unmistakable evidence of his rank.

But Aissé knew those commanding and finely-cut, if slightly coarsened, features; the deep dark eyes, now soft with tenderness, and the smiling lips eagerly parted and showing a glint of white beneath the heavy moustache.

The man's open hands were held out; his whole air and manner were full of the noted royal charm, which had always appealed strongly to Aissé.

She turned crimson and shrank back, astonished, a little resentful.

" Monseigneur! "

" Mademoiselle, I crave a thousand pardons for my brusque entrance, and for having startled you. I yielded to an irresistible temptation."

Aissé curtsied as low as she could in the narrow space between the hearth and the fender-stool, on the other side of which the Regent stood.

" Monseigneur, it is I who should ask pardon. I did not know who it was that—that—"

His Royal Highness

"That disturbed you in a manner which, I pray you to believe, Mademoiselle, meant no disrespect. Yet your alarm suggests that you were afraid of finding yourself in the grip of an ogre, which would have been strange under this ecclesiastical roof," he added with a smile that was faintly satirical.

Aïssé smiled too, more faintly still, and shook her head.

"Naturally," continued the Regent, "ogres do not frequent the house of Abbé de Tencin and his beautiful and amiable sister. Then Mademoiselle must have been deeply absorbed in a particularly agreeable day-dream for her to feel such a shock at its interruption."

His tone of light banter seemed purposely designed to reassure her.

Recovering from her confusion, Aïssé answered simply:

"It is true, sire, that I was dreaming, and a sudden break to one's dreams is apt to make one nervous."

"Is it permitted to ask, Mademoiselle, whether any special individual formed the subject of your day-dream? If this were so, then in truth that individual should feel himself blessed."

Philippe held out one hand to her in a frank, caressing gesture. But she chose to interpret the gesture as a sign that she had not saluted him with the conventional ceremony, and curtsying again put the tips of her fingers beneath his palms.

"A man could wish for no sweeter boon, Mademoiselle, than to be dreamed of kindly by you," he said, and raising her tried to draw her closer to him—a difficult matter with the stool between them. Aïssé caught her foot on the stone hearth.

"Take care!" exclaimed the Regent; and clasping her hand he added, "Will not Mademoiselle advance beyond this barrier? Since I give her my most honour-

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

able assurance that I am no ogre seeking to devour helpless ladies? "

His smile made Aïssé feel that in her alarm she had exaggerated the language of mere badinage. She adopted his light tone.

"As your Royal Highness perceives I am between two dangers more formidable perhaps than an imaginary ogre. A step back and I set myself alight; a step forward and I fall over the stool."

"But here is safety," he said, and held out both arms as if to embrace her.

She evaded his clasp by another formal bend. It was easy to take too much for granted in the florid manners of the day. Aïssé dared not appear to misunderstand what might merely be polite persiflage. Equally she dared not let it go further. She took refuge in equivocation.

"Surely, sire, the safety of all France lies in the hands of Monseigneur the Regent."

He laughed. "*Vrai Dieu!* To have the joy of holding Mademoiselle Aïssé within my arms might well outweigh the safety of all France."

Aïssé's eyes dropped before his ardent gaze.

"Your Royal Highness is pleased to talk in parables which do me too much honour," she replied ceremoniously. "I grieve that your Highness should have had so unfitting a reception. Madame de Tencin will be desolated at having committed the inadvertence of being absent on the occasion when your Highness deigns to honour her with a visit. If Monseigneur will have the goodness to excuse me I will inquire whether Madame cannot be at once apprised of his arrival."

He stayed her with a sign that was a command.

"No, Mademoiselle, I will not excuse you. Since you insist upon recognising the privileges of my rank, I in my turn will hold to them, and I must beg that you

His Royal Highness

will remain with me. I have much to say to you. Meanwhile, Mademoiselle, will you not be seated?"

He motioned to a settee set at right angles with the fireplace, but she remained standing, her eyes cast down, her figure stiffening. His eyes were fixed upon her, filled with a great desire. His full lip trembled. He addressed her by her name.

"Aïssé! I cannot play the potentate while I yearn only to be your slave. The Regent refuses to dismiss you from an audience, but Philippe d'Orléans implores you to let him kneel at your feet and sue for your favour, as a starving beggar might sue for alms. Aïssé! you will not deny me?"

The thrill in his voice told her that this was something more real than Court gallantry. Yet she had never been quick of comprehension in such matters. She raised her large dark eyes to his. There was in hers a frightened question. Unaccustomed to royal etiquette, she hardly knew how to escape his importunities without committing some social blunder that to a well-bred Frenchwoman would have seemed worse than a crime. Her silence, her evident embarrassment, the blush which rose and went on her cheeks, changing their ivory pallor to rose-pink, all gave him new confidence. Certainly the girl loved him, he thought, and her hesitation must arise from maiden coyness, which to him, used as he was to the advances of all women, made her yet more adorable.

He took her hand again, and now she made no resistance when he led her to the settee with as courtly a bend of the elbow as if they had been dancing a minuet at Versailles. When she was seated he placed himself beside her, leaning eagerly forward, one knee bent and showing the jewelled garter above his silken hose.

"Aïssé," he went on, "it is Philippe d'Orléans, not the Regent of France, who offers you his heart's best

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

devotion and pleads for your tenderness, your affection in return."

She drew a quick breath, but answered with forced calm.

"Monseigneur, Philippe d'Orléans cannot be other than the Regent of France, and he has a right to the tender affection of all loyal subjects of the king, in whose place he stands."

The Duke gave an impatient laugh.

"*Sang de Dieu* ! The Regent may be content with all France's loyal devotion, but Philippe d'Orléans requires more than that. The love of this woman for this man is what *he* demands of Fate."

"Monseigneur, this man already possesses the love of many women. Is not that enough?"

"No, it is not enough. Many women are not the *One*—that one woman for whom my heart cries. Give her to me and the rest shall go. I throw them to the winds." He made a sweeping movement with his arms, then bent nearer. "Aïssé, it is *you* whom I desire," he whispered passionately. "It is *you* who have been to me the One woman ever since that first day when you passed by me out of the room without a word and I could not then—as now—bid you stay."

"And that, Monseigneur," she ventured, "was in the house of—of—"

"The Comtesse de Parabère. I know, I know. Is it on this account that you are so cold, so distant? I swear to you that you need fear no rival. Believe me, there would be no heart-suffering involved in such a rupture. Do you not read the character of the Comtesse—charming, generous, inconstant as a butterfly? It is Nocé now who has the key to her affections. For the rest, I have done with the light-o'-loves, whom it would be an insult to name to you. I am weary of these *amours* which lulled the senses but had no claim upon the soul. Whether there be a Hereafter or no I cannot

His Royal Highness

say, whether man has an immortal part I know not, but this I do know, that *here*”—and he struck his breast—“here is an insatiable crave for something higher, nobler, purer than the distractions of the Little Apartments can afford me. I long for true companionship, higher love. In your eyes I seem to see that for which I seek. Aïssé, I repeat, you cannot—you will not deny it to me?”

The girl was overwhelmed, almost carried away by this outpouring of himself. She tried to speak, but the words would not be uttered. In emotional emergencies she was never ready with her parrying stroke. As in that never-to-be-forgotten experience with the Ambassador, she lost ground through sheer inability to grasp the situation at the psychological moment.

So now the Regent read her wrongly. He took her unresponsiveness for acquiescence. Claspng her hand in one of his he put his other arm round her shoulder and drew her to his breast. His lips were on her forehead as her head rested against him. He spoke fervid words in her ear.

“My beautiful . . . look at me! Let me drink deep of thine eyes. In all France and in all the East there can be no eyes so soft and bright and true as thine. . . . Give me thy lips, Aïssé. . . . Nay, I will not seize them. Thou shalt yield their sweetness at thine own dear will. I am no impatient schoolboy, my dear, to tear open the rosebud’s petals before the hour of bloom. But oh! believe me, I would give the Regency—yes, even the crown of France, were it mine to barter—for the right to drown my longing in thy kisses. . . . What? Do I frighten thee, sweet? Is my touch too rough for thy lily purity? Nay, I will be very gentle with thee, Aïssé. Do not fear.”

He released her instantly when she began to struggle in his embrace, and let her leave his side without making any attempt to detain her. He felt so sure of her that

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

he could afford to be patient. And he, like the Ambassador, having sated himself in his time, found a certain pleasure in waiting for the ripe fruit to fall of its own accord. His forbearance—though she did not fathom its motive—appealed to Aïssé more than all his honeyed protestations. Shaking in her limbs, she made a little reverence and said, in a trembling voice:

“Monseigneur has honoured me profoundly. I am deeply touched. But what he asks is impossible.”

“Impossible!” The Regent started in frank surprise. “How impossible? You love me, Aïssé?”

She looked at him, at his goodly figure, his fine face, that she admired so much, but in which she discerned so plainly marks of the self-indulgence against which her innate purity revolted. And while she knew that in other conditions she might have loved Philippe d'Orléans, she yet felt that there lay an insuperable bar between them.

She shook her head at his question. “No, Monseigneur.”

“But you are not indifferent to me?” he urged, still astonished and incredulous. “I thought—I understood that you had for me a sentiment of admiration—of love—”

“Monseigneur is mistaken. It is true that I have always cherished a sincere admiration for your Royal Highness. But love! Ah! that is a sentiment in which I have no part. I do not know how to love.”

“You do not know—how—to love!” he echoed slowly.

“Sire, I have never loved. Ah, yes! I have dreamed dreams of a love that should be stronger than death, and in comparison with which all else should seem of no account. But the reality, as life has shown it to me, appears only a horror—a crime.”

The admission seemed dragged from her by the

His Royal Highness

compelling force of honesty. She spoke dreamily. He stared at her in wonder.

"Strange!" he murmured to himself, remembering Madame de Tencin's hints. This wound to his pride cut home. Was it conceivable that the girl meant what she said? But in Aïssé's clear eyes there was no trace of coquetry. And the higher self of the man rose up within him and recognised her sincerity.

"If I did not know that you are an angel of truth," he said, "I should doubt your confession."

"Monseigneur need not doubt," she answered simply.

There was silence, during which he eagerly searched Aïssé's face, and he was puzzled to find in her expression a certain remoteness, a curious exaltation which removed her from the category of all women with whom he had previously had amorous relations, and which struck a note in himself that had never hitherto vibrated to the influence of any other woman. That quality of remoteness from vulgar interests made him long inexpressibly to possess this one woman. He pressed her with something of a boy's awkward eagerness, very different from his ordinary, man-of-the-world polish.

"But I cannot let you go. It is impossible that I am altogether mistaken—misinformed. Aïssé, thou art not indifferent to me?"

"Monseigneur, I am honoured. I admire, I . . . I . . . respect. That is all."

"Respect!" He was stung by her slight halt before pronouncing the word. "You are not sure even that you *respect* me! Well, it is no wonder!"

"Monseigneur, with all my heart I respect the Regent of France."

"But not Philippe d'Orléans?"

"Monseigneur!" she said in great perplexity and distress. "What can I say that is not unworthy to be

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

uttered by one whom you have thus honoured, yet who at least owes you candour."

"Speak as your heart dictates, my Aïssé."

"Then, Monseigneur, I respect in Philippe d'Orléans all that there is of nobility and high purpose, and of these I know that there is much. I know that a great soul breathes beneath the outer man, who—oh, Monseigneur! I dare not say what I feel. Pardon my freedom of speech."

"I thank you for it, Aïssé."

He rose and put out his hand to the trembling girl. She kissed it, bending low. He drew her down—not to the settee where he had placed her before but to the low stool on which she had been sitting when he entered. Then again he seated himself and bent towards her, speaking very gravely and earnestly:

"Let me bare my soul to you, Aïssé, as I have done to no woman in the world—save one, and that is long, long ago."

His face saddened; the girl's soft eyes rested on him pityingly as he went on.

"You wish me to understand that the man who has frittered away his capacity for nobler love in degrading *liaisons* with opera-dancers"—he pulled himself up, for the image of Emilie rose before him—"I would except one of these," he said hastily, "for in her there is something of the qualities I find in you. Well, well, that is no matter. Let us admit that a man who has yielded himself as I have to the seductions of the senses has no right to demand the devotion of such a woman as you have proved yourself to be."

"Monseigneur! indeed I am not worthy—" she stammered.

"Yes, I know your history, Aïssé. I have informed myself of all the circumstances of your life—of how you were bought in the slave-market, of the fate for which Ambassador de Ferriol designed you, of

His Royal Highness

your conquest of the brute in him by power of your stainless purity. I know that all men reverence you—but what is difficult for me to conceive is that you have loved none."

"My life has been dedicated, Monseigneur."

"To the man who insulted you!"

"To my father by adoption, Monseigneur."

"That gives me hope," he exclaimed. "I, too, am unfit to pluck this immaculate lily, and yet I dare offer likewise the dedication of my future life to the altar on which I would place my queen of flowers. I dare to offer you the single worship of my heart and soul. Is that sufficient guarantee, Aïssé? A Bourbon has ever kept his word to the woman who held his heart."

"Oh, Monseigneur, it is too much. I have nothing to give that is worth the price."

"That is for me to judge, Aïssé. Do not answer me all at once. Give yourself time. You say you do not know how to love. Let me be your master. Rest assured that I shall show myself a kind master."

The word "master," with all its old painful associations, and a touch of imperiousness in Philippe's tone, affrighted the girl anew. She moved from her seat.

"Monseigneur, it is useless. May I beseech your Royal Highness's permission to withdraw?"

"On the contrary, I beg that you will remain."

Aïssé trembled. "Monseigneur will not force me to do so against my will."

At once he made a courteous gesture of dismissal.

"Mademoiselle is free to leave me. Never yet did Philippe d'Orléans force the consent of any woman. I merely beg a favour which you refuse."

She hesitated; her eyes grew misty. She sat down again, facing him in silence.

"Aïssé, I ask you to listen to me," he resumed. "Judge me when I have put forward my plea. I do not defend my faults—I acknowledge them to the full.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

But in all men there is a meed of good—mingled though it be with much evil."

Aïssé's eyes grew larger yet with unshed tears.

"Oh, Monseigneur! You overwhelm me by your greatness, your magnanimity. Who and what am I that I should be honoured by your confidence?"

"You are the ideal woman for whom all my life I have been seeking. Had our stations been different and all conditions other than they have been—had you been my wife—it had been better for Philippe d'Orléans—better too, perhaps, for France. Though," he added after a moment's pause, "I call Heaven to witness that through all my weakness and my follies, the welfare of France has always been paramount with me. I made a vow on the day I became Regent that *through me* no mistress should ever again rule France. Not even for you, Aïssé, would I rescind that vow."

"Monseigneur, I honour you for the vow. Had all things, as you say, been different, I would have gloried in upholding it."

"Yet as things are," he said, "I could do much for you—for those to whom by adoption you belong. I would be true to you and to you only. You should be ennobled, enriched, guarded, protected. The interests of your adopted brothers would be advanced."

"Monseigneur, my adopted brothers will advance on their own merits. There is nothing more to be said. Aïssé has been bought once; she is not to be bought again."

"That I well know! It is to your tender heart that I appeal. Hear me, Aïssé. You know nothing of my youth. You were a babe just brought to France when I was a young man plunged into the vices and dissipations of Paris—encouraged in them by my tutors and counsellors. I said I would bare my soul to you. Forgive me if the record gives offence. I will not speak of my wife. Madame la Duchesse d'Orléans

His Royal Highness

deserves the respect due to her character and her position. I will say only that at the age of nineteen—for reasons of state—I was married to Mademoiselle de Blois. Madame la Duchesse and I have always understood each other, and it has been my endeavour not to fail in the marital duties required of me. Madame la Duchesse has never complained of lack of consideration on my part. To my children I have been—I am—a devoted father. To the best of my ability I have served France, as a boy on the field of battle, as a maturer man in her Council Chamber. My enemies accused me of having removed by poison those of the blood royal who stood between me and the Regency. Never was accusation more monstrous—as was proved at the trial upon which I insisted. Nevertheless, the same enemies have impugned my guardianship of His Majesty the King. Now, to preserve His Majesty I would sacrifice—I will not say my own life, that is nothing—but the lives of my children, which are dearer to me than my own. So much for what I have done in my public capacity. I stand there void of guilt. For the sins I have committed—as a private gentleman—they concern myself only. I have stolen no woman's honour; my bargains have been kept to the letter, and for that which I have had I have duly paid. Mademoiselle, shall I tell you what lay at the root of all my early infidelities—of all my explorations into the region of the senses? It was the search after the Ideal—the ardent curiosity which consumed me to fathom the Unknown—the existence of the soul—the question of immortality—the laws of Nature—the riddle of creation—the problem of love. To solve these mysteries I studied chemistry, I pursued art, I probed pleasure to its depths, I satiated myself with passion—always longing, hoping, to discover the Divine Elixir, the Word of that insoluble enigma of sex. Many times I thought I had found it, only to realise that I was as far from it

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

as ever. Once—*once*—his voice faltered—"it seemed to me that I loved with my soul as well as with my senses. Mademoiselle Aïssé, the magnet which first drew me to you was some faint resemblance of type that I discerned between you and that exquisite and disinterested woman from whom a cruel fate separated me. You have perhaps heard her name? I speak of Mademoiselle de Séry—Madame la Comtesse d'Argenton—who married secretly the Chevalier d'Oppède."

In his last sentence Aïssé felt the worst sting of disillusionment. Mademoiselle de Séry had been faithless to the romance of their youth. The girl stretched out her hand involuntarily and clasped d'Orléans's. He lifted her hand to his lips. "You would have been true," he said.

There was a pause. She withdrew her hand.

"I need tell you nothing else of my life," he finished. "You have only to read the defamatory verses of M. La Grange Chancel to know the worst of both Philippe d'Orléans and the Regent of France."

He smiled a bitter little smile. Aïssé knew not what to answer. The revelation of the real man had touched her to the core. Nevertheless, she did not waver in her decision, even though the imprisoned soul of the man looking forth at her from his eyes implored her.

"They tell me you are *dévoté*," he said. "Doubtless you think that you have found in your religion the word of the enigma. Yet you say that you have never loved, and this at least I have discovered—that the nearest approach to a solution of the great mystery is Love."

Aïssé was silent. He looked at her, his face working with emotion. Then suddenly he—the Regent of France—knelt before the Circassian slave.

"See, Aïssé. I said that on my knee I would sue to you. See this starving beggar who prays you of

His Royal Highness

your sweetness and womanliness to stay his hunger. Ay, starving in heart and spirit! The poorest—if yet one of the richest men in France—starving for love—thirsting for truth. You and you alone, Aïssé, can supply both. Give me yourself to worship and so lift me to higher things. I do not ask you to love me yet. I am content if you will let me earn your love."

Shocked at his attitude, the girl started up full of compunction and distress.

"Oh, rise, Monseigneur. How can I bear that you should kneel to me! You—the greatest noble in France—to abase yourself before a girl so little worthy. You shame me, Monseigneur! Oh, rise, I beg of you. It is not fitting that you should stoop to one so far beneath you."

"There is no shame in kneeling to a saint, and before now kings have made obeisance to a star," he said, smiling. Then he straightened himself to his full height and stood looking down at her. And Aïssé thought that he seemed more than ever king-like for that act of voluntary humiliation. She was weeping unrestrainedly and wildly kissed his hand.

"Wilt thou grant the beggar alms, my queen? *Morbleu!* it is a bold beggar who demands the greatest gift a woman has it in her power to make. But the sacrifice shall be repaid, Aïssé. I swear it on the honour of a gentleman of France. Your dower shall be my Château d'Escarlian de la Roque in Picardy and the Hotel d'Escarlian in Paris. And with them the title of Marquise d'Escarlian de la Roque, and *rentes* in proportion secured to you and your heirs for ever. No, no," as she made a passionate gesture of refusal. "You have said that you could not be bought—it is no bribe that I offer. I desire only to prove to you that your welfare and dignity will be my first consideration, and that you will have a right to rank with the noblest

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

names in the land. Aïssé, say that I am not pleading in vain—say that you will give me yourself? ”

“ I cannot, Monseigneur. If I could give myself without love I should be no better than any other weak woman who has sold herself to a ruler of France. Nay, I should be worse—a thousand times worse—for many a one of those must have loved the man—or to many a one love may have been a less holy thing than it seems to me. I deem it so holy, so rare, that methinks I shall go down to my grave never having known love. For me to violate love’s sanctity would be a greater sin than in one who held it more cheaply. Thus I can only thank your Royal Highness and reverence you for having shown me your real self to-day. Glad and proud should all French men and women be that such a man is here to guide the destinies of France. Ah, truly, Monseigneur, if I could love you I might well feel happy. But it seems that I must bear a stone in my breast, since even such words as you have spoken will not warm it into flame.”

“ This, then, is the end of my hopes, Aïssé? ”

“ It would be a shame to you, sire, and to me, were it not the end? ”

“ Then be it thus,” he answered. “ I am no poltroon to importune a woman. So, Mademoiselle, the audience is ended and it is *I* who am dismissed. Adieu! Remember Philippe d’Orléans.”

She made him a deep reverence, but he took her two bare hands in his and kissed them respectfully.

“ Well would it be for France,” he said, “ if more of her women were like you.”

Then he left her, passing hurriedly out through the archway, the curtains of which fell noiselessly back as he swung them open on either hand.

CHAPTER VIII

LOVE, THE LORD

ISSUING suddenly through the *portières*, Monseigneur le Duc came upon Madame de Tencin and Madame de Ferriol. The last-named had by this time become privy to the plot, and all unseen this unprincipled pair had been listeners to the conversation between the Regent and Aissé.

As His Highness appeared, Madame de Ferriol retreated—a screen across the corner of the ante-room affording her convenient shelter—but Madame de Tencin, who towards the close of the interview was enraged at Aissé's persistent refusal of what Madame herself considered the Prince's splendid offers, had thrown aside caution and was peeping through an aperture in the curtains. Thus she was face to face with the Regent. Yet though caught in this equivocal act she contrived with supreme subtlety to control her greeting of him, which suggested that her presence was purely accidental and that she had but just re-entered the room.

His Highness was pale with emotion and anger. It was clear that she had been eavesdropping—he did not know and scarcely cared to what extent. But he suspected that she had for her own purposes—possibly revenge—lied to him.

Stooping towards her, he spoke at white heat of contempt but in low tones, being still mindful of the girl in the room behind him.

"Madame, you have deliberately misled me. I now understand your infamous designs. Had they

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

succeeded, you would have despoiled the white soul of a veritable angel from heaven. Shame—shame upon you!”

Madame de Tencin kept her presence of mind sufficiently to make her formal curtsy.

“Pardon, Monseigneur, if there has been a mistake it rests with you. I endeavoured to make you comprehend Aïssé’s character. To overcome her scruples was your affair—not mine.”

“Understand, then,” retorted the Regent, “such scruples as those of Mademoiselle Aïssé are impossible to be overcome by mortal man—save by the one she loves, which one *I* am not. Therein you lied to me.”

Madame de Tencin’s drooping eyes unveiled and flashed an upward glance of fury, but the next moment she spoke with her usual suave intonation.

“Your Royal Highness’s perspicacity may be at fault. With Aïssé’s parentage she can scarcely have been born cold. She is like all young girls who have scant acquaintance with the force of passion. This bud has hitherto been unbroken—remember.”

“And will remain so—for me,” said Philippe, sternly.

“I crave your Royal Highness’s leniency for Aïssé. She is a fool, but not hopelessly besotted. She must surely appreciate the honour you have paid her,” quoth the de Tencin, anxiously. “If Monseigneur will but deign to give the girl a little time reflection will doubtless convince her of her folly. *I* myself will point out to her the madness of such nonsense in a mere Circassian slave.”

“At your own risk,” cried the Regent. He had moved a step towards the door, but turned. “I want no slave, Madame. Moreover, Mademoiselle has proved that she is not to be bought. Treat her fittingly,” added the Regent, hoarse tenderness in his voice, as he stood gazing down on the cringing, clever Frenchwoman.

Love, The Lord

From his eyes flashed scorn; he could not restrain a biting sarcasm. "Such a woman," he said, "is a strange anomaly in France."

Madame de Tencin's eyes kindled with responsive fire, but as quickly as before she controlled herself.

"If Aïssé retracted her decision would not your Royal Highness give her another chance?"

"A chance!" he exclaimed. "*Par Dieu!* it would be *I* who should thus be given the chance. No, Madame. If Mademoiselle Aïssé is not to be bought, neither will I barter the devotion I would have lavished upon one worthy of so much more than I can offer her. I desire the free gift of her love—or nothing."

With that His Highness went out, waving back the de Tencin as she advanced to escort him with the deference due to his rank.

"I thank you, Madame, but I prefer to go unattended," and bowing slightly he passed down the stairs.

When the door had closed upon him Madame de Ferriol came forth from behind the screen, her peevish, refined face distorted with rage.

"*Grand Dieu!* Has she sent him away? Oh, the ingrate! the viper! This is how she repays the benefits we have poured upon her! And what might she not have done for us in our misfortunes! Marquise d'Escarlian de la Roque! Didst thou hear, Claudine? Think of it! Were anything to happen to the King she might be a second Maintenon! Claudine, why do you not speak? Say, what is to be done with the girl?"

Madame de Tencin's narrowed eyes were fixed upon the curtain, as though their malignant gleam were piercing Aïssé between the intervening folds. It was not a pleasant gaze for one who had offended her to encounter.

"If I had my way she should be shut up in a dark cell and whipped until she prefers the Regent's kisses

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

to the stripes of knotted cords. But hark! " as hurried footsteps flitted across the adjoining room, and there came the sound of an ineffectual attempt to open the farther door. "Our angel wants to fly away! We must not permit her to avoid explanations. Fortunately I have provided against escape."

Aïssé had stood by the window watching for the Regent to leave the house. As soon as he had gone her first impulse was to depart as quickly as she could from the trap she guessed had been laid for her, so she caught up her shawl and turned to the door by which she had entered. It was locked from without, and now she understood that she had been left of intention at the Regent's mercy. Against him she felt no resentment; it was plain to her that he had been led to believe he would find a willing mistress. But her soul burned with indignation against Madame de Tencin.

She darted towards the curtained archway. But as she drew apart the curtains Madame de Tencin confronted her, and seizing her by the arm dragged her back into the *salon*. Claudine had a naturally violent temper, ordinarily held in leash, but ungovernable when she lost command of herself. Now for a minute or more she vituperated the girl, forgetting all reserve, not caring even to screen her machinations. Madame de Ferriol joined her sister in upbraiding Aïssé. Was she an idiot, or a stone? How else could she have resisted Monseigneur's impassioned pleading? Think of his magnificent promises—the rank and wealth he had offered her! To be *maitresse en titre*, created Madame la Marquise d'Escarlian de la Roque, with the rich château and its lands—one of the most charming of the possessions inherited by the Regent from La Grande Mademoiselle—secured to her and her heirs for ever. Truly she must be mad to refuse him.

Madame de Tencin took up the tale. Was not *that* sufficient to satisfy a penniless slave reared on the de

Love, The Lord

Ferriols' bounty and dependent upon them for the food she ate and the clothes she wore?

So the two taunted Aïssé upon her origin. How dared *she*, who had been a slave exposed for sale in the public market, how dared she flout a position that had been coveted by some of the highest-born ladies in France? Was she any better than a La Vallière, a Montespan, ay, even than the Comtesse de Parabère, a de la Vieuville of the *vieille roche*, that she should scorn what they had considered worthy of acceptance?

Aïssé stood between the two viragos, rigid, silent, till the first force of the storm had spent itself. Then she found words. But Aïssé was never adroit at retort.

"You got me here for this under a false pretext," she cried. "You knew that I would not have come had I dreamed of the truth. You deceived His Royal Highness too, for he is too noble to lend himself to so base a plot. Then you hid yourselves and listened to his outpouring of himself—to that which should have been sacred. Oh! it was cruel. It was infamous."

The sisters, slightly sobered, looked from one to the other, and Madame de Ferriol began a stammering denial. Aïssé silenced her contemptuously.

"How else should you have known of His Highness's generosity? No, Madame, you have betrayed yourself."

Madame de Tencin laughed cynically.

"Little fool! Never mind that. Do you understand that you—notwithstanding your doubtful origin—have had an opening such as is not offered to one high-born woman in a million?"

Aïssé drew proudly back from the two sisters.

"As for that, Madame, you high-born women of Paris must set small store by your honour since you are so eager to sell it. But I am not like you. I do not regard it as a privilege to be the purchased mistress of a

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

prince. If ever I give myself to any man it shall be for love and love only."

"Oh! spare us these heroics," sneered Madame de Tencin. "Take my advice and reflect before you let such an opportunity pass. Thanks to *my* putting in a word for you, His Highness may give you one more chance, but it will never come again. For Heaven's sake, consider what you are about. Here are riches, rank, power—more—a man's soul, in your hand. The Duc is half beside himself with love for you. How you have learned the secret of rousing these amazing possibilities in man is a mystery beyond me. Nevertheless—"

"Nevertheless, Madame," Aïssé interrupted warmly, "you waste your breath. Monseigneur is aware that I do not reciprocate his feelings. He is too chivalrous a gentleman not to accept my decision. I cannot believe that he consented to your pleading his cause against my will and conscience."

"Bah! what is the worth of the will of a mere girl like you? And conscience— Oh! I forgot, you are *dévoté*. Well, if you choose, you can make of Philippe d'Orléans a convert to the Church. He would do anything for you, and Mother Church needs such sons to secure her power in France. Come, *mon ange!* does not the need of Mother Church cry loud enough to convince you?"

"No, Madame; not when *you* are her advocate."

Madame de Tencin's temper got the better of her again.

"You will repent this, Mademoiselle. You will find that it is not wise to turn me into an enemy."

"Aïssé, think of us," interposed Madame de Ferriol.

"Have you no regard for *me*, for the Président, for your adopted brothers? Consider all we have done for you—how I became a mother to you from the day you entered my house, how you were brought up as one of my own

Love, The Lord

children; nothing in reason denied you, care and money lavished upon your nurture and education. When we were rich you shared with us in our prosperity. Now that we are poor you turn against us. You know our difficulties. The disgrace of this taxation, of these unfounded charges, has cut the *Président* deeply. His one idea is to save money—to reinstate himself in his former position. A word from you to the Regent would do everything. But no! you are a monster of ingratitude. You are a serpent which has bit the hand that fed it."

And so on in the same strain. The sisters brought all their forces to bear on the attack. As in the scene which Aïssé had endured after the return of the Ambassador from Constantinople ten years before, argument, entreaty, upbraiding, abuse, all were tried. The girl turned to Madame de Ferriol, speaking passionately.

"It was Heaven's decree, not my own choice, which placed me in your house," she cried. "God knows that I have never been ungrateful to you, Madame. I would work for you if need were most gladly. Should it ever be in my power I will repay you as far as I can for the money you have spent upon me. But to sell my body, that which should be love's free gift, I will not. Love is too sacred a thing. Madame, surely none should know this so well as *you*."

Madame de Ferriol's face changed. Her eyes drooped before the girl's accusing gaze.

Madame de Tencin retorted:

"A fine teacher to instruct her elders truly—this slave who sets so high a value upon her own charms. But it is amusing—that!"

Aïssé took no notice of Madame de Tencin's remark. She addressed Madame de Ferriol again.

"I repeat, Madame, if ever the day comes when I shall have the power to do so I will repay you. I refuse to sacrifice my honour—even to pay such a debt

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

it is impossible. But be sure that if Heaven gives me the means I will repay you. In the future, if I am in distress, there is always a refuge open to me. If it were not for my guardian, who in his age and weakness needs me, I would even now enter the religious life. And I warn you that if you press this question further upon me I will tell the Ambassador everything. From him, at least, I am sure of the treatment of a kind and loyal protector."

So saying Aïssé made her exit through the ante-room, undetained any longer by either of the women. She paused only at the curtains to say:

"Remember, Mesdames, a word more and the Ambassador shall know the truth."

For all three women were aware that in the Ambassador's precarious state of health shock and worry were dangerous to him. He had been nigh to death, as chroniclers of the period tell us. Fear of calamity, therefore, and of consequent financial loss, would certainly prevent further active expression of Madame de Ferriol's anger, while Claudine de Tencin had to conceal her chagrin as best she might. Probably the only person who rejoiced on hearing of Aïssé's refusal to entertain the Regent's proposals was M. l'Abbé de Tencin, and even he had cause to regret it, for his colleague and rival, Dubois, thereby retained paramount ecclesiastical power in France—not to mention strong personal influence over the Regent until the day he died.

Meanwhile the watcher in the square garden—seated in the same intent attitude beneath the guelder-rose tree—saw the Regent emerge from Abbé de Tencin's house.

He stood on the pavement, looking up and down for his coach, the quietly-appointed one in which he was wont to ride when he went about as a private gentleman.

Love, The Lord

It was driving slowly along at the opposite corner of the square, the coachman's back turned to his master. The Duke crossed the road with the evident object of walking down the square garden and intercepting the vehicle when it turned. But at the sight of him, the woman in the violet cloak turned back her hood, disclosing the pale, anxious face of Emilie.

Tortured by suspense and jealousy, Emilie, during the last hour, had seemed to have lived years instead of minutes, for she had suffered all the bitterness and anguish of momentarily-expected death. She was a tragic figure, this dancer, drawing in sustenance from great emotions. History tells of her that she was educated beyond her class. She was "erudite as a Benedictine," a favourite phrase of the chroniclers. That she had a lofty and disinterested mind none have ever questioned. She loved Philippe d'Orléans with all her heart, and therein lay the secret of her influence over him.

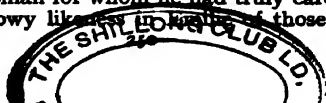
Her first impulse now had been to dart forward and accost him, but seeing that he was coming into the garden she halted. Her keen eyes discerned in a glance that this was no successful lover coming forth from a joyous tryst with the fair captor of his fancy. Failure was written on his face. The revulsion of feeling Emilie experienced after her agonised apprehension was too great. It turned her dizzy and faint. She tottered as she moved from her seat and leaned against a tree which screened her from his sight. As he passed along the path, his eyes fixed moodily before him, in their disappointment and a curious yearning exaltation, Emilie's bosom was torn with pity and tenderness; and moreover, a strange, contradictory fury against this Circassian girl who had dared to refuse the king of Emilie's world. How could anyone in her senses repulse the Regent? There could be but one explanation. Aissé loved another!

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

A wild longing came over Emilie to speak to her adored, to touch his hands, to assure herself that he still was her own. For though she knew that there were others—great ladies above her, and more especially the *maitresse en titre*—La Parabère—Emilie had never been resentful of these rivals, who had been regarded by her in a measure as necessities of the position, almost as much so, indeed, according to the facile morals of the day, as the Regent's wife—because she had always known hitherto that deep in his inmost heart the Regent loved her best.

But this Eastern dependant of the de Ferriols—the girl said to have been born a princess yet who had been sold as a slave—stood midway between the great ladies and the actress herself, and Emilie proportionately resented Aïssé's place in her horizon. She felt intuitively that the Regent's passion for Aïssé was no matter of propinquity, like those others; nor was it, alas! a mere surface fancy, but went deeper than the rest. However, the desire had seemingly met with no satisfaction; the Circassian had remained cold, for which let Heaven be thanked, even though Philippe d'Orléans were thereby slighted. For to Emilie would now be left the blessed office of consolatrix.

She stepped forward from the shelter of the tree, and following Monseigneur, softly called his name. Her intonation was peculiarly musical. It had always appealed to him, and now it sounded silver-sweet in the man's ears. He had not expected to see her, but he turned and waited for her to come to his side. As he looked at the pale, earnest face, the dark eyes welling with comprehending love and compassion, a gush of tenderness towards her swept into his heart. There was the indefinable resemblance of type in Emilie to that of Aïssé—to that of Mademoiselle de Séry—the only other woman for whom he had truly cared, and it was the shadowy likeness in her of those qualities



Love, The Lord

for which his own being craved as its complement that, in his present sore disappointment, made him accept consolation from her. He was only unevolved man after all, and his instinctive impulse was to drown pain in the cup that came nearest.

For once, forgetting his usual precautionary ways in public, he took her outstretched hands in his and clasped them tightly. Her unspoken sympathy was met with a sad little smile, but he let her walk beside him to the further end of the gardens, whereat her heart rejoiced. Not many words passed between them, but these were enough to give Emilie proof that her faithful love would still meet with its due meed of recompense.

Later on she saw him get into his coach, and then went back to her seat. She had made up her mind still to watch and wait in order that she might speak to Aïssé. She felt that she must judge for herself of the woman who had given her back her joy, must convince herself that Aïssé was no intriguing coquette who would rob her of it again.

When Aïssé came out of the de Tencin house she was so upset that she could not at first think how she should get home. She too crossed the narrow street and entered the square garden, in which the trees seemed to furnish a sort of refuge. As she moved hurriedly across the grass she came face to face with the woman in the dark violet cloak whom she had previously observed sitting beneath the guelder-rose tree. Aïssé, whom Emilie had always seen looking so calm, seemed now extraordinarily agitated. Her lips trembled, her nostrils were dilated, her soft Oriental eyes flashed. Nevertheless, undismayed, Emilie curtsied very low, and in a few rapid, disconnected words begged permission to speak to her.

Startled and astonished Aïssé looked at the woman, and with an impatient movement swung her shawl closer over her shoulders, saying:

"I do not know you. There must be some mistake."

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

"But I know *you*, Mademoiselle. There is no mistake," said Emilie, bending forward with clasped hands, her dark eyes shining into Aïssé's eyes with a compelling force. "Listen to me, I beg. There is something I must say to you."

"Say it then and let me go on," replied Aïssé, briefly. "Since I do not know you it cannot be of great importance."

"Not to you, Mademoiselle, but to me of the greatest importance. You will know my name—I am Emilie the actress, who danced in the *Ballet des Enfers* in the Opera of *Proserpine* by Messieurs Quinault and Lulli."

"Ah!" Aïssé remembered the rôle in which Emilie had made herself famous, and in which, according to gossip, she had first attracted the Regent. Aïssé drew herself back with an offended air.

"Then, indeed, I cannot guess what you can have to say to me."

"Ah, Mademoiselle, do not look at me so coldly. I was once pure and proud as yourself, though yet I was only a poor needlewoman. I had to work as *you* have never had to work. It was for the support of one I loved. But God had given me a gift, Mademoiselle. I used it to gain bread for my dear mother and myself. Why not? Are the gifts of God to be despised?"

"Not when they are used as God would have them used," replied Aïssé, gravely looking at the woman.

Emilie's eyes fell, a warm blush suffused her pale cheeks.

"Mademoiselle, I would have used them to God's glory alone had the world permitted it. But for a dancer to please the directors and remain virtuous—that is impossible!" Emilie made a tragic gesture with her hands and went on. "Mademoiselle, that I fell was not of my own desire. The story is a cruel one. There are such things in Paris. Heaven grant that *you* may never know them."

Love, The Lord

A sudden change came over Aïssé's face. Her thoughts went back to her own early girlhood—to that ledge outside the Ambassador's *salon*. Again she scented the sweet, faint fragrance of the wistaria; again the purple clusters brushed her face as, at the peril of her life, she had sped along the narrow foothold. *She* had found safety. Emilie had fallen. But who had been the cause of Emilie's shame? Surely it was not—it could not have been—

"You cannot be speaking of—of—" she stammered; she could not name the Regent.

Emilie quickly divined her thought.

"No, no, not *him*!" she cried. "Oh! not him. He is the noblest of men. Ah! Mademoiselle, I think no ordinary woman is worthy the honour of being loved by *him*!"

"I think so too," said Aïssé, simply. "But you—poor girl! Poor girl!"

Emilie's face shone.

"Do not pity me," she cried. "I was lifted from out my hell into heaven itself. Ah! truly since then I have lived in heaven. Yes, yes, for none have held his heart as I have held it. No high-born lady has been so much to him as Emilie."

She paused and pulled a long breath. Aïssé watched her interestedly.

"That was until he saw *you*, Mademoiselle. Your beauty drew his heart away from me. But now that I, too, have seen you I cannot wonder. Oh, how I have feared you, Mademoiselle, from the moment that I knew who had changed him. I had perceived the change. I guessed that he no longer loved me as before. And so—I watched you; I have followed you many times. I followed you here to-day."

"But that was foolish," said Aïssé, smiling. "Why should you have followed me here to-day?"

"Because something told me that you were to meet

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aissé

him and I wished to learn the truth for myself." Emilie's face was radiant. "Now I know it. I feel sure that you have sent him from you. And it is to his Emilie that he turns again."

Aissé frowned, but Emilie continued rapturously:

"Oh, indeed it is so. I have seen him. He comes back to *me*! And I want to thank you. Oh, do not scorn my gratitude! How it is possible you can have remained indifferent to him is to me a thing incredible! For to me he is the light of my days. If he were but a humble workman in a garret how happy I should be! But he is far, far above me. I can only worship him—my lord—my king—my sun! Mademoiselle, you have given me back my sunshine."

"How could I give you back what was not mine?" answered Aissé, stiffly. "You have distressed yourself without reason, but I congratulate you upon possessing the affection of one so noble as Monsieur le Duc, whom I have indeed found to be just what you describe."

"You have experienced it, Mademoiselle?" exclaimed the actress, adding, with a note of wonder, "and yet—"

"Monseigneur has deigned to reveal to me in himself a soul whose grandeur I can never forget," said Aissé. "But though I admire—honour M. le Duc, I have not the power to give him that love which he deserves."

"You have not the power to love him!" said Emilie, wonderingly. "Pardon me, Mademoiselle—but say then—it must be that your heart is wholly given to another? There is someone else?"

Aissé shook her head.

"There is no one else. You are more fortunate, for you have the capacity to love. I am not so blessed."

"It will come—the love will come," said the actress,

Love, The Lord

significantly. "Some day you too will know the happiness of giving yourself to your beloved."

Aïssé made a sharp, negative motion; a shiver of distaste went through her.

"I think not," she said. "To me it would be difficult. I do not give lightly."

"That is well," said Emilie. "The greatest gift in the world should not be given lightly. But when he who is lord of your being shall come and claim the heart foreordained to be his—then, Mademoiselle, you will know that a woman gives to her dear love and lord because from *him* it is impossible that she should keep back—ay—the substance of her very self, since it is a part of him."

"It may be so," said Aïssé, "but to me that love is as a dream—a parable of which I cannot comprehend the meaning."

"Because the lord of your destiny has not yet come—he who shall expound the parable and interpret the dream. Sweet Mademoiselle, your heart is like a flower—closed. But the sun of your desire will shine on it some day and open out all the petals so that love may creep in and warm the white soul that sleeps there. When that flower is gathered, Mademoiselle, by love's mysterious hand, you will comprehend the parable and the dream. And even though it were to cut short the stem of your life, you'll realise that death and love are sweeter far than any life which sinks, unloving and unloved, into the grave. For you too will love, I prophesy—you too will give yourself for love."

BOOK III.—THE CHEVALIER

CHAPTER I

LINKS IN THE CHAIN

ONCE more to the *chansonades* for the Regency story:

*"L'argent s'anéantit,
Le banquier manque de crédit,
Le courtisan languit
Le soldat repoussé périt
La noblesse s'ayilt,
Tout le monde pâtit,
Le Régent rit,
Le bourreau s'enrichit,
La vertu se séduit,
L'homme s'enfuit,
Le sage en vain rougit,
Tout se perd petit à petit."*

In the year 1719 the power of John Law of Lauriston, financier, was at its zenith. It was he who inaugurated the Age of Paper. Then, as in the time of Solomon, gold was of no account. Notes of fictitious value were the acceptable currency. Every print-shop exhibited flaring posters of virgin forest peopled with savages yearning to exchange the bullion with which they were represented as laden for John Law's "Mississippi" shares. The Rue Quincampoix—the head-quarters of "Law's system," was daily barricaded by coroneted coaches. All the great ladies gambled in shares. Princes of the blood turned stockbrokers.

Most of our own little set got themselves inside the

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

gigantic bubble, which in 1721 dissolved with its fairy riches, leaving ruin and desolation in its stead. Literary people are proverbially unbusiness-like. Montesquieu lost heavily; Voltaire proportionately, but later on recouped his losses. Fontenelle—Law's favourite—was the only one who did not suffer. Madame de Parabère and her agent, Nocé, also did well for themselves. Fairly so did Président Hénault, the charming statesman wit, one of the intimates of the de Ferriol, de Tencin and du Deffand circle. Madame de Tencin, as has been told, won in the game; her brother-in-law lost his own stakes, while he raked in hers, multiplied. The Regent did not laugh—or if he did it was with his lips only; his heart was sad enough.

The Regent was sick, satiated, disillusioned. It has been said that the hymn to Bacchus is often but a lugubrious chant of the soul. But the wine-cup could not drown the Regent's *ennui*. The pleasures of the Little Apartments needed fresh stimulant. Scandal declared that Madame de Tencin was called in by Dubois to invent or cull from old Greek sources new modes of arousing jaded appetite. Yet only after the day's work, strenuously performed, might debauch have its sway. If ever man burned the candle at both ends it was Philippe d'Orléans, for, through all his excesses, France was held paramount. History never denies that so far as lay in his power he did his duty to the State. But when six o'clock sounded, and when the door of his *cabinet de travail* had closed upon him, nothing remained but an immense longing to drown remembrance in the cup of vice.

Was Mademoiselle Aïssé, with that one heroic hour of self-revelation, quite forgotten? So it would appear.

Every new woman who piqued his jaded fancy furnished but a momentary anodyne. . . . And there were so many of them—*filles d'opéra*, night-haunters of the streets, aristocratic lights-o'-love—what

Links in the Chain

did it matter? "*Facilis decensus Avernî*," jeered the lampoonists, punning on the name of the new mistress-in-chief—Madame d'Averne. She was the heroine of those suppers at Maréchal d'Estrées's house, Bagatelle in the Bois de Boulogne, of the scandals of the secret passage and of the Duke's opera-box. Her supremacy was not long-lived, though, for a time, her star extinguished that of the arch and sparkling Parabère, of the brilliant Marquise de Sabran, even of Emilie.

Now, it was drawing to its close, the Fan-drama of the Regency—that costume play of snuff-box, rouge and patches, with its extravagant conceits, its wit and riot and glory; its grace and charm and license; its vague soul-stirrings, and all its impertinent tragedy hidden beneath the lace and brocade, the pink pompons and gorgeous *parures* of those charming Watteau figures who bowed and curtsied and smiled against a background of green lawn and rose trellis or of old tapestry and Boucher decorations.

On some of the chief persons in the play-bill the curtain had fallen. My lord Bolingbroke was out of the piece. He and his Marquise had bought the château of La Source on the Loire, and were avowedly living there together. There were political and financial reasons, however, why they could not openly marry. The English wife—*née* Frances Winchescombe—at Bucklebury, had died. He writes of her to Madame de Ferriol:

"Il est sûr que j'ai beaucoup à me plaindre de la conduite de feu Madame de Bolingbroke."

For, left in charge of his affairs across the Channel, she had, he believed purposely, manipulated them so ill that the Confiscation Act, so far as he was concerned, still held good at her death, and a considerable sum of money that she might have secured to him, remained in jeopardy.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

That was her revenge for his infidelity, and the worst of it was that the Marquise de Villette would, as regarded certain English property of her own—£50,000 of the Villette money invested in English funds—come with him under the Bill of Attainder were she his legally-acknowledged wife.

My lord cynically continues his letter:

"Elle est morte, dévote ! Que la religion est une chose souple : qu'elle se prête à tout : qu'elle sanctifie tout quand elle est maniée par un habile directeur . . ."

The same remark might have applied to the demise of the Duchess of Berry—swaggering, passion-tormented *Beau Paon*, whose brief orgy of existence closed at the age of twenty-four amidst all the most solemn observances of the Holy Catholic Church.

But though priests surrounded her dying bed and administered the last sacred rites, and though she confessed her sins and resigned herself in the most edifying manner at the last, the lampoonists did not spare her—

*"Fille est morte, la vache aux paniers,
Il n'en faut plus parler,"—*

any more than they spared her father, the only being in the world who deeply mourned her.

Pretty Sœur Sainte Bathilde—Mademoiselle de Chartres—said masses for her sister's soul in the Abbey of Chelles. "Madame Satan," their mother, was too indolent to leave her couch at Saint Cloud to defend her dead daughter against the posthumous abuse of Madame la Douarière. The Princess Palatine hated her grand-daughter and never forgave her the secret marriage with Riom. As for the reputed husband, he was let out of the prison of Pierre-en-Cize—it was the story of his uncle Lauzun over again—and took no apparent part for a while in the profligate intrigues of the great world.

Links in the Chain

Life in Paris with its feverish lusts and schemings went on as before. But it was a hag-ridden nightmare which led the satanic progress. A black spirit of sorrow, crowned with roses, the wine-cup in her hand, brooded over Versailles and the Palais Royal.

The dark shadow travelled southward to fair Provence. It was in 1721-22 that the terrible plague raged at Marseilles. Death and tragedy watched for their prey behind masks of pleasure. In one actor in that drama, at least, pride of place and greed of power were satisfied. Dubois had won his red hat. The young king was crowned, and Dubois, cardinal-minister of France, sat in his red robes, only below Royalty. Twelve guards were attached to his person. A second Richelieu, all power lay in his hands.

Abbé de Tencin, now Archbishop of Embrun, who with his sister had pulled the papal strings, watched too, waiting for his own turn.

The scythe swooped. On the 10th August 1723 Dubois, the apothecary's son, risen to be the greatest power in France, left his scarlet robes, his red hat and his seals of office behind him as he went in the nakedness of his soul to the place he had earned for himself.

Very soon was master and tool to follow. The Regent's doom was written.

Madame la Duchesse de Phalari held first place now among the favourites. In her musical southern voice she recited marvellously. She too, like David with his harp before Saul, was wont thus to exorcise the demon of satiety.

One evening—it was the 3rd of December 1723—the Duc d'Orléans came out from his *cabinet de travail* and went into her room for an hour's solace and refreshment before his evening visit to the King.

Madame de Phalari began to recite a fairy-tale of Provence. The Duke's mournful eyes upon her face seemed to be asking her their eternal question—the

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

question which perhaps, of all the women Philippe d'Orléans had loved, Mademoiselle Aïssé had been nearest answering. Suddenly he groaned; the blood rushed to his face. He was sitting on a couch beside Madame de Phalari; his body swayed, his head fell against her breast, and, as she tried to raise him, he slipped heavily from the couch to the ground.

She went out and raised the alarm. But he never spoke again. That night the cry went over Paris. The Regent was dead. Forty-nine years only was his span. Into those forty-nine years he had put much of evil and some measure of good. The candle had burned quickly and had shed a brave light. Like Goethe's "Egmont," Philippe d'Orléans might have said with his last breath:

"I cease to live, but I *have lived*."

The pamphleteers wrote of him as he lay in his coffin:

*"Dans ce cercueil est enfermé
Le plus grand escroc de la France."*

Was ever baser calumny? With all his faults, Philippe d'Orléans was a gentleman of the old rock. No sharper, but an honest rake.

Mademoiselle Aïssé wept at the news of his death. But at this time the supreme interest—effacing all others—even her grief at the death of the Ambassador—had come into her life. The prophecy of Emilie was fulfilled. Aïssé loved at last.

To tell of the forming of that single long-delayed love-bloom of Aïssé's life one must put back the clock two years at least. The Regent died in the last days of 1723: it was in the late autumn of 1721—so far as it is possible to fix this date from the uncertain records of the memoir-writers of the time—that Mademoiselle Aïssé first met the Chevalier d'Aydie of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, so-called Knight of Malta.

There seems a general consensus of opinion that the

Links in the Chain

meeting took place at one of the receptions of young Madame du Deffand.

It seems strange that the two should never have met before, since there were certain distant ties of kindred uniting the d'Aydies—an ancient and impoverished family in Périgord—with the de Tencins, and thus remotely with the de Ferriols.

The Bautru-Nogents were the connecting link between the d'Aydies and the de Ferriols, likewise with the Biron and Lauzuns through the double marriage of Blaize d'Aydie, Comte de Benoges—father of the Comte de Rions and uncle of our Chevalier—and of the Duc de Biron, with the two daughters of the Comte de Bautru-Nogent—Madame de Bautru-Nogent being sister to the Duc de Lauzun. But it must be remembered that the Bautru-Nogents and the d'Aydies were provincials of the old *régime*, who did not often come to Paris, where Madame de Ferriol lived almost entirely, and that at the period of the Chevalier's introduction to Madame la Duchesse de Berry, and his brief participation in the dissipations of the Court, Aïssé was not in the smart set of the Luxembourg and the Palais Royal and would have had small opportunity of acquaintance with the intimates of *La Joufflotte*. Moreover, the duties of a Knight of Malta implied secret missions—warlike or diplomatic—in many other capitals than that of France.

A word of the d'Aydies. It was an old and proud, though impoverished family of which Vicomte d'Aydie de Riberac, Seigneur de Vaugobert in Périgord, father of the Chevalier, was the representative, and when one adds that his wife, the Chevalier's mother, was Marie de Beaupoil de Sainte-Aulaire, sister of the Marquis of Sainte-Aulaire, it will be seen that the d'Aydies, however poor, were *vieille roche* indeed. Moreover, it was their pride to be descended from Odet d'Aydie, Bastard of Foix, progenitor of the kings of Navarre.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

In the matter of alliances, on every shield were fine quarterings. Young Antoine d'Aydie, gentleman-at-arms of the court of Madame du Berry, had married a great lady, sister of the Marquis de Riberac and daughter of a Bautru-Nogent—poor soul, she died at eighteen. Then Marie d'Aydie was, a little later, united to François d'Abzac de Mayac, dit le Marquis de Migré, while on the Bautru-Nogent side, together with the Ducs de Biron and Lauzun, stand the names of the Marquise de Bonnac—her husband, by the way, was successor of the Ambassador at Constantinople—of the Duchesse de Gramont, of the Marquises de Seignelay and de Sourches.

These and many others belonging to the ancient *noblesse*. A goodly roll!

Was it any wonder that—apart from the question involved of breaking a vow of celibacy and abandoning an honourable career, which must have been a necessary condition to him of her marriage with the Chevalier—the proud and shrinking Aïssé should have hesitated to place herself—she, the nameless Circassian slave—among these dames of lofty lineage?

And she was a girl no longer. She had learned her world. At twenty-seven the Ambassador's adopted daughter, though always pure, was no longer ignorant.

There fell trouble in the de Ferriol household, following on the scene between Aïssé and the two sisters after the departure of the Regent from Abbé de Tencin's house. Neither Madame de Ferriol nor Madame de Tencin were willing to let the subject drop. Every means that subtlety, harshness or persuasion could suggest were employed by them to induce Aïssé to reconsider her refusal of the Duke's offers. The girl's life, in fact, became for a short time almost unbearable from the persecutions of the two sisters, added to her serious anxiety in regard to the Ambassador's health. A

Links in the Chain

sudden crisis in his illness made it impossible to appeal to him. Thus she was left unprotected to meet the attacks of these forces combined against her.

But as the Ambassador, instead of dying, grew better Mesdames de Ferriol and de Tencin were forced to change their tactics. Madame de Tencin—as was the fashion—made her ardour for the welfare of the Church an excuse for her past importunities, and adopted a pose of sweet resignation and of slightly acidulated kindness. Madame de Ferriol merely desisted sulkily from her assaults, making no pretence at feeling anything but anger and disappointment. Indeed, her attitude towards Aissé caused the Ambassador to take a step he had frequently contemplated. He removed with his ward from the Hotel de Ferriol.

This, as may be imagined, did not improve Madame de Ferriol's temper, and relations grew so strained between the two women that from this time till the Ambassador's death their intercourse was extremely limited. M. de Ferriol still paid a small sum towards the upkeep of the hôtel, but the discrepancy was considerable. Président Augustin's affairs were in a worse state than ever, consequent upon the failure of Law's system, so Madame de Ferriol had reason for her discontent and for the parsimony that yearly grew upon her. It changed her from a charming woman of society into a shrewish housekeeper, who pleaded poverty and the wrongs befalling her, through, as she stated, the machinations of Aissé in estranging the heart of her brother-in-law, as her reason for wearing shabby clothes, avoiding going out and discontinuing her former rather lavish mode of entertainment.

This was all terribly painful to the girl. She would have felt it more had d'Argental and Pont de Veyle been in Paris when the change took place, but they were away, and things had settled down a little before they

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aissé

again resumed habitation of the Hôtel de Ferriol. That was when, in 1720, Antoine de Pont de Veyle received the appointment of *lecteur du roi*, and early in 1721, when d'Argental was made counsellor to the Parliament of Paris, sitting in the same Chamber with Aissé's admirer, Berthier de Sauvigny—appointments that both brothers held for many years, and in which they gained much credit.

The Ambassador hired an apartment in a big hotel in the Rue Ste Anne, not very far from the convent of Aissé's girlhood, and close to the old home in the Rue Neuve St Augustin. Deep gratitude did the girl feel towards her Aga, for she knew well that it had been on her account only that the Ambassador had made the move, which was very trying to a man of his age and in his helpless condition. In some respects the change was not for the better, for the new rooms were less commodious and well furnished, though Aissé was happier there than she had been in her former abode. They had brought as little as possible with them from the Hôtel de Ferriol, consequently the apartment seemed bare in comparison, and the Ambassador appeared reluctant to buy any fresh furnishings. Bénédict commented to Aissé upon a certain newly-developed spirit of economy in the once extravagant Ambassador. The man-servant perhaps suspected what Aissé was unconscious of, that Charles de Ferriol, knowing that at his death a great part of his income would cease, was trying to lay by a store for Aissé.

In any case they lived happily enough in the Rue Ste Anne, and were on good terms with Madame de Ferriol's sons. The young men came fairly often to visit their uncle and adopted sister, but in reality Aissé's life was now more solitary than it had ever been before. She could not leave the Ambassador for more than a few hours at a time, and thus was unable to visit her dear Marquise and my lord Bolingbroke at their

Links in the Chain

lately-acquired château of La Source, and though the Ambassador liked her to go into society in Paris, she felt a certain reluctance in so doing, because she knew that gossip had made free with her name in connection with the Regent, and that her refusal of the position he had offered her was put down by the scurrilous to her inability to break the ties binding her to the Ambassador. As for that last, it did not matter much what the scandal-mongers said; she had practically outlived scandal on that score. In fact, she had withstood so much that she was indifferent to public opinion as concerned herself. It should be noted, however, that later on she cared very much lest through her any discredit should attach to the Chevalier d'Aydie.

And this brings us to Madame du Deffand's reception. Let us put ourselves back for the moment into the year 1721, and imagine ourselves a part of that Parisian Society in which all these persons lived. Not so difficult if one remembers that civilisation in all ages has certain fundamental characteristics—always the same, however much the social customs of the day may differ. And not so much difference at that after all, if, for example, we of London move the clock back some twenty years; London of the eighties was much more like Paris of the early eighteenth century than is London of the twentieth, with its marvellous strides in science—motors, its wireless telegraphy, its conquest of the air—all the scientific advance of the last thirty years. London of the eighties was emotional, æsthetic, woman-ridden in underground politics, more eager for *pose*, more gracious, more witty, more *spirituel* than is London of to-day. In London of the eighties the *salon* had not quite disappeared. In Paris of the early eighteenth century it was at its height. People wrote letters then; they do not write letters now. Perhaps among the differences between that day and this the language in which they expressed their emotions was

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

one of the chief. Frenchwomen italicised more. When one woman in writing to another said, "I love So-and-So passionately," as, in a letter to Julie de Lespinasse, Madame du Deffand wrote of d'Alembert, it meant only that she had a strong *penchant* towards that particular individual; it did not mean that she would lay down her life for his sake. Though indeed, in the fierce, if brief, transports of eighteenth-century passion life appeared of little account, and to die young, consumed by the flame of ardent feeling, as in the case of Julie de Lespinasse, was the natural and fitting consummation frequently set forth in the romances of Mademoiselle de Scudery, Madame de la Fayette and of the ex-nun, Madame de Tencin.

Which illustrates the reflection that in its present stage of evolution humanity, during a considerable period, has for the most part been progressing through the life of the emotions. It is comparatively of recent times that the life of the intellect—or it might be more correct to say of the higher mind—has come to birth. Formerly, intellect was the instrument of a small, learned minority, and was often weakened by ill-regulated emotion. To-day, and in increasing ratio, mind may be reckoned as the weapon of the cultured many; emotion, as regards its finer uses, the indulgence of the cultured few.

M. Saint-Maurice, the eighteenth-century mystic, used to say of Madame du Deffand, that in her intellect and emotion were two opposing forces which to her life's end would tear her in twain. It was true. Never lived a woman with so much brain, so much sentiment, yet so unsatisfied, and with so little heart.

She was always seeking a grand passion, which, when she found it, either bored her to extinction or was made the subject of such searching analysis that nothing was left of it to feed her clamorous egotism. Yet not-

Links in the Chain

withstanding her selfishness she was good-natured to a point and *bon camarade* to a few women—Mademoiselle Aissé in later life among them—and to many men. Like Monseigneur the Regent, she had an immense curiosity to probe the unknown, and she, too, suffered from hopeless *ennui*. Everything that was real interested her until she discovered its limitations, and then she was disappointed. Only the play of mind afforded her any degree of satisfaction, and friendship with men of genius was the most enduring sentiment that she knew. There was something masculine in her capacity for friendship with men; a masculine element also in her logic, and in a certain hardness that characterised her very power of fascination. She was more cynical and less womanly than Madame de Sévigné, with whose letters hers have been so often compared.

Now, in this connection Saint-Maurice, or his oft-quoted genie, Alael, once made a remarkable statement. After prophesying the future of some persons assembled in Madame du Deffand's *salon*—including her own—he gave certain startling revelations as to the *rôles* those persons had filled in previous existences on earth. That was the occasion on which he referred to the present purgatorial incarnation of M. Arouet de Voltaire.

Madame du Deffand, he declared, had been a man in several lives, until in the last her immortal part had been embodied in the person of Madame de Sévigné herself. Alack, poor lady! hurried, it seemed unduly, in her passage through eternity, she could have but had a short resting-place in Paradise, seeing that no more than a year had elapsed between the death of Madame de Sévigné and the birth of Marie de Vichy Champfrond, afterwards Marquise du Deffand.

Let that be as it may. Knowledge fails for the con-

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

tradition of Alaël. And though occultism was not then the cult it became under the Count de St Germain, Cagliostro and others, just before the Revolution, there were mystical fantastics in Paris under the Regency, who believed implicitly in the vaticinations and revelations of M. Saint-Maurice and his familiar demon, Alaël, just as there are in Paris to-day Diabolists and New Pythagoreans firmly convinced on such supra-mundane matters.

Madame du Deffand's bright eyes, however, beamed brighter with amusement, and her beautifully-arched brows went up higher as she made a retort showing that she at least was unconvinced, a retort smartly capped by the equally incredulous Voltaire.

No way disconcerted, the mystic, turning to the Chevalier d'Aydie, who was also present, congratulated him upon having well chosen his vocation as a Knight of Malta, since he was but following in the lines of his past, when as a Knight Templar he had fought in the Crusades, and in the early days of the Order of St John of Jerusalem had served under the first Grand Master. Thus, said Saint-Maurice, d'Aydie had brought over into his present life qualities befitting the religious knight—the Chevalier *sans peur et sans reproche*. Maybe it was that utterance of Saint-Maurice's which inspired Voltaire with the idea of taking d'Aydie as his model for *Couci*, the Bayard of one of his romances.

Then as the talk of the company turned upon certain special characteristics of old-time warriors of the Cross, the mystic went on to relate that many among the bands which had gone forth in defence of the Holy Sepulchre against the Saracens had been spiritually armed with spells and charmed weapons. Because at that time the land of Palestine was under peculiar heavenly protection from having been the dwelling-place of the Christ. And since it was written that the Infidels should be driven thence, an army of

Links in the Chain

spirits was sent in aid of the earth-army, the leaders of which had thus received ghostly enlightenment and support.

D'Aydie listened with rapt blue eyes fixed on the speaker. Saint-Maurice's words seemed to set vibrating some chord of music that could only sound in the deepest recesses of his being. He would have liked to hear further of that other-world lore. But this was not the style of conversation which Madame du Deffand cared to encourage among her assemblage of wits and philosophers. She was not at this time so certain of her foothold in society as she had been at her marriage and as she became later on; nor did she as yet exhibit the critical exclusiveness, for which she was afterwards famed, in the choice of those whom she received in her *salon*. Her attitude towards her husband had brought her into social disfavour. For, notwithstanding the lax moralities of the day, theoretically it was the fashion to uphold husbands. A husband being a useful adjunct to a woman of position, it was considered that a wife with good taste would naturally accord him his proper place in the household, not in too marked prominence, of course, and certainly Monsieur should not be permitted to interfere with the pleasures and foibles of Madame. These things all arranged themselves according to the canons of high society. The *mari complaisant* was an institution of the Regency period. But a young married woman, whose dot had been small, not separated from her husband for good cause, and not living under the same roof with him for at least part of the year, was considered to have offended against good taste, and in the Parisian world there could be no greater crime.

Truth was, Madame du Deffand, after six months of matrimony, grew sick to death of the conjugal bond, and was far too outspoken to conceal the fact. She frankly disliked the Marquis du Deffand; he jarred upon

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

her; she did not want him about, that was all. She preferred to ignore him. One might have asked after her maid or her pet dog, but her husband!—that was a subject which bored her. So after a time it was agreed that the Marquise should inhabit her small hôtel off the Rue St Germain, while the Marquis departed to his country estates. Then as she was very well off—amply provided for by the Marquis's generosity—an added offence in the eyes of Paris—Madame du Deffand, barely twenty-six, beautiful, fascinating, thirsting for new sensation and for intellectual stimulus, resolved to get all she could out of life. The game she had to play was a little difficult. She was not subtle and unscrupulous as her friend Madame de Tencin, and could not "make religion her riding-hood to shield her from storm and tempest." Madame du Deffand looked to the support of her aunt, the influential and amiable Duchesse de Luynes, but all Paris knew that though she would not openly disavow her niece, that great lady, of an impeccable propriety, did not approve of the part that niece had taken. No matter. If prudish great ladies looked askance at her, and on the other hand the riotous Palais Royal set found her too intellectual for their taste, Marie du Deffand knew there was always the middle-world, where she could command the society of all the cleverest men in Paris—Fontenelle, Voltaire, Marmontel, Montesquieu—for whom she became a species of literary agent; above all, the accomplished Président Hénault, who, but for a tie in the background, would then have proclaimed himself her admirer. Here was no lack of material for the beginning of a *salon* to be carefully weeded as opportunity offered.

So towards the end of the year 1721 Madame du Deffand's fortnightly evening receptions were in full swing. Among her former friends many went to be interested and amused; Mademoiselle Aïssé and the Chevalier d'Aydie, just arrived from

Links in the Chain

a visit to his paternal home in Périgord, among the number.

Destiny had been waiting for her cue. Now she ushers on the stage the conqueror of Aissé's heart.

CHAPTER II

CHEZ MADAME DU DEFFAND

ONE of Hans Andersen's fairy stories tells of the Goloshes of Fortune, and of how he who may be lucky enough to find and choose to put on those wonderful goloshes has only to wish himself back into any particular time, place or company of the past, and, heigh presto! he is there.

The bygone scene renews itself; the ghosts appear once more clothed in the similitude of flesh, and speak and move in the habit in which they lived. One has stepped into the vast gallery of animated pictures which exists in the Universal Mind. Nothing, we are told, that ever has been can cease to be; its replica remains fixed in finer matter so long as the world endures.

The trouble is to find the goloshes—to get possession of the magic key to that great gallery of living ghosts.

Well, let it be understood that this humble biographer, at your service, has discovered the Goloshes of Fortune, has obtained the key, and is ready to lead you forthwith into the place where dead things can be made alive.

We are in Paris of the eighteenth century. Here is the street wherein stands Madame du Deffand's hôtel. It is the evening of her fortnightly reception. Eight of the clock has struck. The guests will soon arrive.

It is a dark night. The houses loom out of shadow except where, here and there, a fire-pot has been placed over the gutter, and its dancing flames make a vivid patch of illumination. Several of these blazing fire-

Chez Madame Du Deffand

pots have been put in front of a great mansion at the corner of the Rue St Germain, in preparation evidently for a sumptuous entertainment, not Madame du Deffand's simple, semi-literary conversazione. That is the hôtel of M. le Duc de Bouillon, and later on Mademoiselle Adrienne Lecouvreur will recite there from a play by Racine in Monseigneur the Regent's honour. Madame du Deffand aspires to no such glory; she does not go to the expense of special fire-pots. Her hôtel is small, old-fashioned, with flat windows. Those in the two lower floors, however, are well lighted.

Now the sedan chairs are being borne quickly up one after the other. The torch-bearers accompanying them, after the occupants of the chairs have been admitted, thrust their torches within the big iron extinguisher beside the door-steps. There are numerous loiterers in the narrow street. Doubtless the illuminations at the greater hôtel at the corner have attracted the little crowd of discontented Parisians—forerunners of the *sans-culottes* and *tricoteuses* of sixty years later. For, unheeded by the gay aristocrats dancing on a volcano's brink, underground rumblings have begun to be heard and the revolutionary forces are already gathering strength for the cataclysm to come. One may hear angry mutterings as the torch-bearers push a way for their respective chairs, and jeering comments as the occupants descend and go into the house.

Yet the women who attend Madame du Deffand's semi-literary receptions, dainty and sumptuously clad as they appear, are not all from the nobility which will furnish victims to the guillotine.

Madame du Deffand must do some weeding by-and-by. The Comtesse de Parabère, who has condescended to patronise her friend's entertainment, sniffs contemptuously as she mounts the stairs behind simple, blue-eyed, middle-class Madame Geoffin, still almost a child, though she has been married eight years, and

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

who is destined in the future to preside over a *salon* that shall rival that of Madame la Marquise du Deffand, and even of the ex-nun, who shall act her part of social god-mother to the homely little *bourgeoise*. Madame de Parabère, haughtily exclusive through all her moral vagaries, says to herself that she will not come again among such middle-class folk. It was only good-nature that made her look in this evening on her way to the grander party at the Hôtel de Bouillon. Also, she expects to meet Mademoiselle Aïssé, for whom of late she has displayed a violent devotion. The Parabère was enchanted at the girl's rejection of the Regent and frankly told her so, vowing at the same time a sister's friendship—which vow, indeed, she kept loyally until Aïssé's death. For though Emilie has been reticent to her patroness on the subject of her interview with Aïssé, the story of the Regent's overtures has leaked out, Mesdames de Ferriol and de Tencin having taken no pains to conceal the fact.

Follow me within. The vestibule is dark oak panelling, severe wood-furnishings; high-backed chairs with coronet and coat-of-arms; a shallow oak staircase.

Mount it and we are in a famous *salon*. Two medium-sized squarish rooms, a wide carved archway between them with drawn curtains of deep orange-brown, and a third smaller room, off the front one, also with an archway, which is closed in by two tapestry screens covered with quaint faded figures of an earlier date than the Watteau designs in vogue to-day.

The rooms are sombre as regards decoration, not like the rooms of a lady of the period, but appearing rather those of a man. Here shows the masculine touch in Madame du Deffand; it is of a piece with her contempt of feminine sentimentalities and frivolities. The usual upholstery in flowered brocade, the ormolu mountings, mirrors and falbalas in which the ordinary

Chez Madame Du Deffand

Regency Marquise delights, do not appeal to the Marquise du Deffand.

To continue the catalogue of her interior. Two high, rather narrow windows in the front room, facing the street, and three at the back, looking presumably upon a garden, severely draped with the same orange-brown velvet as hangs at the centre archway. Each room, front and back, has a large open fireplace and fine overmantel with carved figures in the centre, and pillars supporting shelves on which are bronzes and heavy candelabra. Of china there is but little. In the fireplace of the back room a cheerful wood fire is burning; the front one is empty. The walls of the *salon* are panelled in dark oak to within a few feet of the carved ceiling, beneath which runs a fluted frieze.

Some portraits in deep carved gold frames hang on the panels, and at intervals are set sconces, carved also and picked out with gilding, in which burn many candles. Every now and then a lackey bearing a long wand, with an extinguisher on the top, comes round, putting out the guttering tapers and substituting fresh ones. Madame du Deffand loves light and has a horror of darkness. Is that from a prevision of the blindness of her old age? And the profusion of blazing candles relieves the sombre effect of her decorations.

The candles are reflected in the parquet floors, bare except for a rug here and there, and with squat stools, upholstered, on bowed carved legs, standing about. Except for settees round the walls the front room has been almost cleared of furniture, but the back room, with its fire, bookcases and *fauteuils*, looks more comfortable. Two lackeys strut about in liveries of dark crimson, with long-skirted coats, silk hose and buckled shoes, their wigs powdered, combed straight off the forehead, and tied by a black ribbon behind. A few of the elderly men among the guests wear their own hair combed and tied back in the same way, but the

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

younger and more foppish affect full curly wigs or part their own curling locks, allowing them to fall in waves on either side. The dandies carry three-cornered hats—as opera-hats are carried nowadays—and thin canes, which are ornamented with little bunches of ribbon or black velvet, and maybe a diamond buckle. Very fine and courtly they look in their full-basqued coats of velvet or brocade, their lace ruffles and buckled red-heeled shoes, as they bend and kiss their hostess's hand.

Madame du Deffand stands in the front room, facing the entrance door, the great screen, with its faded mediæval figures in *coifs* and long straight bodices, or in knightly armour, making a becoming background to her own distinctive and essentially modern personality.

Nevertheless, it is the Marquise's fancy to garb herself after a sombre and slightly middle-aged fashion, and to assume an old-style air, somewhat after the model of her aunt, the Duchess de Luynes—a pose which no doubt commended itself to that dame of the ancient nobility and was adopted by the Marquise under the impression that it would help to counteract her invidious position.

Here is the portrait of Madame du Deffand at twenty as she receives the guests which now begin to throng the doorway.

An oval face, keen, sparkling with intelligence, the features fairly good, but depending for effect upon brilliancy of colour and expression, the cheek-bones rather high, the chin pointed; thin, firm lips, capable of the sweetest, and also of the most daintily satiric, smile—a little curl at the corners of them being one of her greatest charms. She has long narrow eyes, looking sometimes deep blue, sometimes dark brown, sometimes bright and hard, sometimes soft and tender. They are set rather close together, giving her a peculiar and

Chez Madame Du Deffand

fascinating expression. She is of the medium height, has thin shoulders, an elegant figure, that would have seemed very slender but for the fashionable padded hips. She wears to-night an over-dress of black brocade with square-cut bodice, pointed at the waist, laced lattice-wise in front across a white chemisette and turned back with old-rose velvet over a quilted petticoat of deep pink satin.

Long chains of sorts were the fashion in Regency days. Madame du Deffand wears one that is extremely valuable—black pearls alternating with diamonds. It is a marriage gift from her husband, and she is wont to make a bitter joke about it—as being the least objectionable of her matrimonial fetters.

Madame du Deffand's little jokes are not always in the best taste. She has not learned yet to bridle her tongue, which is by no means gentle, for she is of opinion that it is wiser to attack at the onset rather than wait and allow oneself to be attacked.

As she stands to receive her guests it would be a brave person who attacked her. She carries her head high—her darkish hair rolled back in the style afterwards called after the king's mistress, Pompadour, and lightly powdered—which accentuates the fine curve of her brows and the beauty of her complexion, for which she was remarkable even when an old woman. A black velvet ribbon, tied in a little bow and fastened with a diamond brooch, encircles her long milky throat. Her elbow sleeves are edged with full lace ruffles. She wears mittens and handsome rings, one of rose diamonds surrounded with emeralds conspicuous on her forefinger as she flirts with a fan exquisitely painted and having ebony sticks set with small diamonds.

The rooms have been filling rapidly. Many of the women are pretty, and all are sumptuously dressed. The men are more evidently of distinction; some of them wear decorations and are in full Court fig, for they will go

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

on to the Hôtel de Bouillon by-and-by. The company seems attractive, for all that Madame de Parabère regards it with a flouting air. Certainly there are more middle-class people here to-night than Madame du Deffand would have invited to her house a year or so back. She is quite aware of the fact, and of Madame de Parabère's scorn, and her scintillating wit displays itself often at the expense of her more questionable guests, whom she criticises, almost to their faces, with such intimates as Fontenelle, Voltaire, Condorcet and Marmontel, neither of which last stays very long.

Oddly enough, nobody seems to mind Madame du Deffand's lofty impertinences. The Marquise possesses a curious magnetic power of charm. There is the secret of her success. She is essentially a magnetic woman, who radiates activity, and who—since she is always taking in as well as giving out—attracts towards her a variety of different types.

She is laughing and talking now to a stout, middle-aged gentleman with an air of importance, wearing black velvet, who displays a large silver cross upon his coat. Yet he is not in ecclesiastical habit, and his sensual lips and eyes gleam disagreeably at sight of a pretty woman. As the funkey announces "Mademoiselle Aïssé" he cranes his thick neck and gazes devouringly at the girl, who advances modestly through the throng and curtsies to her hostess, as do most of the unmarried women or those of lower rank than the Marquise.

Aïssé's curtsey is very deep—almost as deep a one as she might have made to a royal personage. But though Aïssé has a certain Oriental way of accentuating such ceremonial acts, a curious dignity and aloofness in her rob them of any suggestion of subservience.

She is delightfully dressed to-night and more in the prevailing mode. An over-dress of pale brocade, flowered with bunches of delicate pink roses, is looped

Chez Madame Du Deffand

up with blush-pink ribbons over a petticoat of cream-coloured satin. Her silk stockings and shoes are pale pink; and in her hair, worn rather high, is knotted a wreath of very small pink roses. Little clusters of the same roses are attached to the ribbons looping her over-dress, and they nestle in the lace of her bodice and hang with the pink ribbons from her carved ivory fan. She wears mittens of white lace that meet the lace ruffles at her elbow-sleeves, and black velvet wristlets with pearl buckles. Round her neck hangs the long gold chain studded with large Oriental pearls, from which some little gold knick-knacks fall.

Madame du Deffand greets the Circassian with compliments upon her charming appearance, which she says has lost nothing from confinement in the Ambassador's sick-room. Aïssé accepts the compliment with composure as the small conversational currency of the day, and replies politely to inquiries after the health of the Ambassador, whose personality has always interested the Marquise, his keen intelligence and cynical outlook on life appealing to her own temperament. It is a real regret to Madame du Deffand that the Comte de Ferriol is now too helpless to come to her house. But there are fresh arrivals claiming the hostess's attention, and before the stout gentleman has time to obtain an introduction, Aïssé has glided unobtrusively through the throng towards the fire in the back room.

As she crosses the parquet floor, interchanging a glance here and there—smiling at Madame de Parabère, who is deep in talk with M. de Nocé, and nodding, first to her faithful admirer, good Berthier de Sauvigny, and then to Arouet de Voltaire, who like a watchful rat is observing everything from a distant corner—Pont de Veyle advances to his adopted sister and addresses her with kindly, but faintly formal, courtesy.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

Says he, that had he known that Aïssé would be alone he would have done himself the honour of escorting her; to which Aïssé answers, with a shade of cynicism in her manner, that the circumstances of her life oblige her to be much alone, so it is well she should accommodate herself to the lack of an escort.

Pont de Veyle bows gravely and inquires somewhat perfunctorily after the health of his uncle, his eyes wandering, as he speaks, to the group near the doorway round Madame du Deffand, whom he deeply admires. At that moment the Président Hénault is announced. A man not in early youth—his rich brown hair, thick and curly, inclining to grey—thinnish, broad-shouldered, with an agreeable and interesting face and a genial, gallant manner. He is rather untidily dressed—ruffles crumpled and crimson neckcloth carelessly folded—in a velvet coat of ruddy brown velvet piped with cream and opening over a heavy cream brocade waistcoat. His greeting of Madame du Deffand shows plainly his attraction towards that fascinating lady—a feeling that may well turn into something much warmer than friendship.

As a matter of course he ousts from his position beside the hostess that stout gentleman of the silver cross and unctuous, self-important air. The gentleman of importance looks annoyed and makes a movement towards Aïssé and Pont de Veyle, only to be obstructed again. Pont de Veyle has placed Aïssé in a chair near the fireplace, at an angle which commands the entrance-door, and many people come up and speak to her, but he remains close by, leaning towards her occasionally and addressing her with a proprietary air. Pont de Veyle has no objection to assume proprietorship for the moment over a lady so greatly admired. He has a way now of addressing Aïssé as "my dear sister." It regularises the relations between them, and Pont de Veyle wishes to give no ground for false conjecture.

Chez Madame Du Deffand

Pont de Veyle has aged and carries in his bearing the consciousness of his responsible official position as *lecteur du roi*. He has the long de Tencin cast of countenance, and is very good-looking, with his straight features, dark blue eyes and clear, sallow complexion. His glossy dark hair, combed back, has a faint parting, from which it waves on either side high on his forehead, but he does not affect the more dandyish curls. His dress is rich and rather sombre—black satin with a deep-cut, white-flowered waistcoat, black silk stockings, silver buttons and very fine lace ruffles. His manner is quiet and excessively courtly. He has a gentle, slightly disdainful self-assurance, but he does not put himself forward. It is his foible never to seek, but to let himself be sought.

He too nods to Voltaire, but not as would d'Argental were he here. Pont de Veyle still has his way of sneering at his brother's friends, while Voltaire reciprocates with interest the scarcely-veiled contempt. Here is a picture of the great Voltaire as he was then in his youth, and as he stands now on the edge of the throng, letting nothing escape his keen observation.

A small man, trim, with rather square shoulders, but inclined to be hollow-chested. His enemies describe him as "the little rat who bites in the dark," and there is a suggestion of the rodent in his sharp, peaky face, pointed nose and chin, and thin, protruding lips. Also in a certain scragginess of the hair, which is scanty and retreats from his broad temples. It is not nice hair, being light sandy in colour, ragged, and with little kinks in it, and as he usually wears his own, ill-natured folks say it is because he cannot afford to buy a wig. So far, the only known occasion when he has appeared in flowing artificial tresses is in a portrait done of him a little while back, and the same ill-natured folk declare that he borrowed a peruke for this express purpose.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

He is a quirky kind of person, M. Arouet de Voltaire, highly-strung, irritable, and jerky in manner, particularly if he happens to be out of temper—a not infrequent occurrence. He is sometimes curiously restless, bowing and scraping and gesticulating in the florid fashion of a dancing-master. At such times it is his way to flit in and out of the outer fringe of a throng with darting movements, saying a word to one and another, generally caustic, always amusing. In other moods—as at this moment—he has a trick of standing apart by himself, one knee forward, bony hands crossed over hat and cane, chin poked out, head tense, lean, wiry limbs motionless, the only moving thing about him two fiery sparks of eyes of extraordinary brilliancy and alertness, showing between the slits of his narrowed eyelids and turning rapidly from one group to another, taking in every detail, and storing observations for future use. That is how the little ~~it~~ looks to-night. But he is not such a bad fellow when all is done and said.

There is now an unusual stir at the threshold, which does not escape those sparks of fire between the slits of eyelids, but of which neither Aïssé nor Pont de Veyle, bending over her chair, are conscious. They have been speaking of the health of Madame de Ferriol and of her melancholy and warped humours, which her son acutely deplores—forgetting, in the sympathy which beams from Aïssé's eyes, that she and the Ambassador are in part responsible for the change. This is the one subject wherein Aïssé realises the genuine feeling in Pont de Veyle—his affection for his mother; and the girl grieves at having been a cause of trouble in the family. Distressed at what she hears, she does not look up from the fan which she is slowly furling and unfurling as Pont de Veyle speaks, even when comes the announcement—"M. le Chevalier d'Aydie."

Voltaire, from the rim of the throng, commands the entry of the guests. He is watching the door and is

Chez Madame Du Deffand

instantly alive to the flutter among the fashionable women present, to whom the name of d'Aydie rings as a note of chivalrous romance.

The Chevalier waits for a minute near the door until one or two guests who entered before him have made their greetings, the young knight's gaze going idly round the assemblage. In that moment his attention is arrested by the exquisite face and form of Mademoiselle Aissé.

The Knight of Malta gives an involuntary start; his clear blue eyes take in every point of that dainty figure: the drooped head crowned by its circlet of tiny pink roses, the downcast face, the slim mittened hands playing with her fan as she listens to Pont de Veyle; the pearl-studded chain falling over her bodice, the slender pink-shod feet, in their pale pink stockings, extended to the fire.

"Monsieur le Chevalier d'Aydie!" repeats Madame du Deffand's *maître d'hôtel*.

The Chevalier comes sharply to his senses. He steps across the shining floor to his hostess, his hand on the hilt of a little cross-handled sword such as the Knights of Malta wear, and bows and kisses her jewelled fingers in courtly fashion. The guests—mostly women—pressing forward obstruct for the moment Voltaire's view of the new arrival, and he steps aside, to where a rift in the throng gives him again unimpeded vision of what is going on. Clearly d'Aydie is a person inspiring great interest. He has not been in Paris for some time; not since that episode with the Duchesse de Berry in which the Chevalier played the part of Joseph to Potiphar's wife; and the rancour of the Duchess, added to the odium attaching to his brother for complicity in the Cellamere plot, for a long while made Paris an undesirable place of residence for a d'Aydie. A beautiful form of a man, this Knight of St John. Verily, a hero of romance, but built of no sterner stuff than the

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

idealist is usually made of—one whose head soars to the clouds while his feet rest on the clay. Yet Blaize Marie d'Aydie has so far taken his vows very seriously, and his appearance is in truth that of the typical Knight of Chivalry.

He is exceedingly fair, of a quite remarkable fairness, which, on the principle of counterparts, has possibly much to do with the mutual attraction so keenly felt from the first between him and Aïssé. His flaxen hair, worn in curls and tied back with a broad brown ribbon, has the luxuriant, dressy look of the love-locks of King Charles the First's cavaliers. His eyes are very large and of forget-me-not blue; his pale, sweeping eyelashes give them a cloudy setting; his light brown eyebrows show two long curved lines. His nose is straight and short in proportion; his mouth peculiarly sweet, the upper lip firm, the under one full, but not sensuous, the chin well rounded, a tuft of light hair upon it, and his flaxen moustache curls at the ends. He is tall, his limbs strong, his calves showing to advantage in his silken hose. He has a black velvet garter with a diamond buckle round his knee, and the usual high-heeled buckled shoes.

His dress is the ordinary Court dress of the Knights of Malta. unobtrusive in colouring: of a light fawn, the coat with a narrow piping of silver, full basque and large square pockets, for, on the secret missions on which the Knights are often employed, it is necessary to have facilities for concealing documents and weapons. The ruffles are of fine lace. A broad blue ribbon, with some ornamentation upon it, falls in front; he wears also a small eight-pointed cross of red enamel surrounded with diamonds on his left breast.

Madame du Deffand receives the Chevalier with great cordiality, and tantalisingly keeps him in conversation for several minutes before she motions with smiles towards the number of eager faces turned in his direction.

Chez Madame Du Deffand

"You cannot complain, my dear Chevalier, that Paris has forgotten you."

He laughs and kisses in courtly manner the fair hands extended to him. Then as he lifts his head, and his clear blue eyes range impetuously the space between where he stands and the corner of the hearth in the further room, they meet for the first time the eyes of Mademoiselle Aïssé.

Instantly the spark is kindled. The fire is alight. D'Aydie, whose idea of woman has always been an exalted one, knows that were he free to love he might here have found and realised his ideal.

Voltaire sees all this. He has been watching d'Aydie from the start. He has his smallnesses, like most great men, and he is jealous, this little watching rat, of those who are handsomer or more popular than himself. His lip curls as he notes d'Aydie's fine presence, the effusive welcome of Madame du Deffand—and she is not given to effusiveness over handsome men—and the buzz round the new-comer. Madame du Deffand provides no form of entertainment but conversation. She is wont to say that it ought to be sufficient interest and pleasure to people to exercise their minds when they are given an opportunity of so doing.

Impulsive though he may be, the Chevalier, however, is also a man of the world, so he merely allows himself to drift, as by accident, in Aïssé's direction. It is not an easy matter for him to steer his course, so many surround him. There is a sort of rivalry between the women as to which of them shall obtain most of his attention. Pretty women in these days have pretty audacious ways which seem to befit the drama of the Fan. One raps his arm with the mother-o'-pearl sticks of her own. Another lightly touches his chin with hers in order to turn his face in her direction. He clasps the hand and the fan together. It is all a charmingly impertinent play of gesture. Another dressy young

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

woman slips her arm through his. They hang on him until his gallantry is hard pressed. Finally, he makes a jesting movement with both arms, as though to embrace the bunch. There follows a volley of light badinage. Someone taunts him with having forgotten his vows. A shrill, sweet voice cries that his vows are the shield of his friendship with women. Another declares cynically that his vows represent the secret of his attractiveness to their sex.

"Mesdames," returns the Knight to these merry taunts, "my vows are my only safeguard. Otherwise such temptation as this would be irresistible."

There is a burst of laughter. Madame d'Averne, the patroness of art and literature, whose biting tongue has no respect of persons, puts in with bold suggestiveness:

"Is it only to royal temptation that poor mortals are then invulnerable?"

D'Aydie's fair cheek reddens, but he retorts aptly:

"Doubtless you have found that so, Madame. To me all women are royal. Their sex assures them of my reverence."

At this, more noise, more play of gesture. D'Aydie is like a twig on which hang swarming bees. Their vagaries draw Madame du Deffand's eyes from Hénault and the stout gentleman of the cross, with whom by turns she has been talking. She frowns at the hubbub, her lips draw up at the corners in contempt. Hénault surveys the buzzing crowd with genial smile; the gentleman of importance makes a Biblical remark about the ease with which silly women may be led captive. Hénault compares most women to sheep, and observes that the Chevalier has a large flock from which to make his choice.

"He is no gourmand," says Madame du Deffand, caustically. "It is only gourmands who devour their peas by the bucketful."

Hénault, regarding her with sidelong earnestness,

Chez Madame Du Deffand

whispers that he trusts she has more sympathy for single-hearted devotion.

Madame du Deffand meets his look straightly with her penetrating eyes.

"I trust, my dear Hénault, that I shall always have sympathy for every sentiment that is genuine. With nonsense of *that sort*"—she flips her fan towards the Chevalier's besiegers—"I confess that I have none."

"You, at least, Madame, have had experience of the devotion that is genuine," he answers.

She shakes her head with a smile at once wistful and humorous.

"I have dreamed of a lasting and undivided love, Monsieur, but, alas! I have never found it."

"Yet you of all women, Madame, should have the power to command such love," replies Hénault. At the same time remembrance checks his ardour; he changes the subject.

"Our fair Circassian is looking well to-night," he observed. "There is a woman who cannot be described as 'a pea in a bucketful.'"

Aissé is facing them, her usually pale face alight with the glow of a blush rose. As she hears the noise made by the Chevalier's admirers there comes an expression of faint disgust upon her features. She has divined d'Aydie's embarrassment and his desire to release himself in order to reach her. His approach appears to have magnetised her. She has risen and stands like one in a mesmeric dream—one who has received a summons heard by herself alone. Her hands are lifted involuntarily to her breast; they clasp her pearl chain as if it were some tangible support, and twist it feverishly. So standing, her rapt gaze fixed on d'Aydie, she only hears half of what Pont de Veyle is saying to her.

Pont de Veyle becomes aware of her abstraction. Always self-absorbed, he has not observed the entrance of d'Aydie, and now for the first time sees him approach-

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

ing, followed by Voltaire. The little rat in the rear has observed everything and chuckles to himself.

Suddenly Aïssé, standing expectant with parted lips, while she is still feverishly twisting her jewelled chain, gives it a spasmodic jerk. The chain breaks in two places, and several of the large Oriental pearls are scattered on the ground.

The Chevalier immediately avails himself of the opportunity to hasten to her aid. Pont de Veyle puts his eye-glass in eye and glances in puzzled fashion at the pearls streaming over the floor. Pont de Veyle does not like stooping. But, in a moment, d'Aydie is on his knees, picking up the scattered pearls, while Voltaire, making pretence of assisting him, murmurs satirically into his ear. Voltaire has a way of creeping unnoticed round people and bending over them while he whispers his keen-witted comments into their ears. Like Pont de Veyle he prefers not to put himself to inconvenience, though he does not mind how much trouble he takes, even over trifles, if they secure his own advancement. Like Pont de Veyle, too, it is his foible not to put himself into prominence, but like Pont de Veyle, who despises him, he also prefers that his presence in any assembly should, at the psychological moment, make itself felt, as indeed at his will it could not fail to do. Such moments afford him inspiration for flights of rhyme, delicate or caustic as may best fit the case, according to his mood and fancy. And he finds this now.

D'Aydie's fair cheeks have crimsoned. Aïssé's have paled to the hue of a white rose as she bends towards him. He has risen, but pauses with the bits of broken chain and pearls in his hand before offering them to Aïssé.

"If you are acquainted with Mademoiselle Aïssé, do me the honour of presenting me."

"It is apparently scarcely necessary," says Voltaire, with his satiric twist of the lip, but he performs the

Chez Madame Du Deffand

introduction. The Chevalier bows low; Mademoiselle Aissé curtsies to the ground. D'Aydie pours the pearls and bits of gold into her hand.

"I hope, Mademoiselle, that none are missing."

Pont de Veyle, saluting d'Aydie, makes courteous apologies for his "sister's" misadventure. But Aissé answers nothing. Her confusion is self-evident.

D'Aydie falters an incoherent compliment, unlike the gallant language of the day. Tongue-tied, the two gaze into each other's eyes. Fortunately, Madame du Deffand's well-trained, lackeys create a diversion at the moment by folding back the screens which block the further archway, and a solemn *maitre d'hôtel* in sober livery announces that the supper of Madame la Marquise is served.

The company proceed to straggle into the supper-room in the order that may best please individual couples. Madame du Deffand's parties are noted for their informality. Some of the more notable guests take the opportunity of making their adieux on the plea of being bidden to meet Royalty at the Hôtel de Bouillon. The Chevalier is not one of these.

Aissé is still in a dream. Something wonderful and momentous has happened to her, but she is slow in grasping what that something is. Voltaire knows, so does Madame du Deffand, whose amazing capacity of gauging emotion has frequently filled her friends with astonishment. She summons the poet to help her marshal her guests into the supper-room, reserving Pont de Veyle's arm for herself, much to that young man's carefully-modulated transports of pleasure—for Madame du Deffand, with her keenly critical faculty, her cynicism, her intellect, her fastidious taste, is his secret admiration always.

Aissé and the Chevalier are talking stammeringly to each other, more with their eyes than with their lips, she again seated in her chair, he leaning against the

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

pillars of the fireplace, looking down upon her as she puts away in a little bag at her waist the broken parts of her chain.

Madame du Deffand is no spoil-sport. She nods and smiles.

"You two seem well paired," she says. "Pray, Chevalier, escort Mademoiselle Aïssé."

The Chevalier bows low and offers his arm; Aïssé, who has risen, curtsies, as polite usage requires, ere she puts her little hand in his, and the two, pacing slowly, join the laughing crowd in the supper-room.

Supper at Madame du Deffand's receptions is merely a stand-up collation: steaming *potage*, partaken of in quaint curved china saucers of lovely colouring, light viands easily eaten—cakes, fruit in abundance, hot-spiced cup ladled out of a large silver bowl by the *matre d'hôtel* in black livery and white silk stockings; gold-hued, sparkling wine poured into long-stemmed glasses, and roasted chestnuts served in napkins, which dish occasions some little horse-play and a good deal of amusement. The young and hilarious in the party burn their own and their partners' fingers in handing the chestnuts to each other, and boisterous pleasantries likewise takes place in the tossing to and fro of single grapes, which, being large and luscious, occasionally burst and stain the ladies' delicate dresses. Madame du Deffand is not pleased at this roystering, and registers an inward vow that so soon as she has put herself in a position to pick and choose her guests such as these shall no longer be invited.

The graver spirits take refuge in the corners of the supper-room, where are a few little tables at which one may eat and converse in comparative quiet. It is to one of these that the Chevalier leads Mademoiselle Aïssé.

When the punch has been ladled out people are left to wait on themselves, and the Chevalier forages at the

Chez Madame Du Deffand

buffet for his companion. The table next Aïssé's has been appropriated by a gay group belonging to the set of financiers—once frequenters of the Hôtel de Ferriol—who happen to be discussing the affairs of that family and the cessation of Madame de Ferriol's hospitality, which they attribute to its rightful cause—lack of funds.

The women of the party glance at and whisper about Aïssé, jealous of her for her beauty, her perfect dress, and for having carried off the prize of the evening. They throw across at her an occasional saucy sally. One inquires with pointed emphasis after Madame de Ferriol and why it is that she is not here to-night. Aïssé answers with distant formality that she has not seen Madame de Ferriol in these last days; whereas the sharp little *bourgeoise* retorts:

"Ah, then you cannot tell us whether it is true that Madame is so poor, since M. l'Ambassadeur went to live elsewhere, that she cannot now afford to go into society?"

Another strikes in, impertinently eyeing Aïssé's exquisite costume as she does so:

"Surely, since Mademoiselle Aïssé is noted for her charities, she might have presented Madame de Ferriol with one of her cast off-gowns."

At that unlucky moment Pont de Veyle passes by. Aïssé has stiffened and turned very pale, and there falls a sudden silence. This type of chattering woman fears Pont de Veyle. But he has no eyes for any but ladies of the great world. This sort he ignores, and if brought into contact with such, his courtesy, though unimpeachable, has a certain sardonic politeness.

Had it been d'Argental who had overheard that remark there would probably have been some sort of scene. D'Argental would have been the gayest and most roystering among the young bloods, making love to the women and quarrelling with the men who might offend him with equal impartiality. But Pont de Veyle

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

never quarrels. He merely avoids people who say things that hurt his dignity. Only, as he passes, he gives Aïssé an almost imperceptible look from between his narrowed de Tencin eyelids, which makes her feel that he holds her responsible for the change in his mother's fortunes. Whether or no he has heard what was said, he shows no other sign of having done so, as he gently but firmly forces his way back from the buffet towards Madame du Deffand, to whom he soon says good-night.

When the Chevalier returns with plate and wine-cup filled, again Aïssé falls under the dream-sway of her knight. She eats little, but drinks from the cup of red wine he gives her, and, as in taking it, her hand touches his, a current of new life-force seems to rush through her being.

They talk in low tones together, of what they scarcely know; the music of each other's voice is enough.

Like a dream the remainder of the evening passes. The Chevalier is seldom far from her side. Even when others are speaking to her, and he is compelled to move away, she is conscious of his gaze continually turned in her direction,—conscious also that his evident absorption in her have made her an object of criticism and amused interest. Not only Voltaire, but many others of the assemblage are watching her and forming their own conclusions.

Aïssé had ordered her chair comparatively early, but when the time comes for her to cross the room alone, and make her farewells under the battery of all those eyes, she gets through the ordeal well enough, for at twenty-seven she has outgrown the leading-strings of chaperonage, her peculiar position having required that she should accustom herself to the freedom it implies.

So she makes her charming curtsy to her hostess in a self-possessed manner, and finds her hand signi-

Chez Madame Du Deffand

ficantly pressed in return, while she encounters a curiously searching look in the Marquise's eyes. Madame du Deffand, always craving for the great emotion, feels a strong desire to study the genuine article, for her perception is keen enough to assure her that this is it.

Passing with smiles and bows through the thinning crowd, Aïssé descends the staircase to find herself closely followed by the Chevalier. As he hands her into her chair one of the little knots of pink ribbon fastening the cluster of small pink roses she wears on her bodice drops on the pavement.

D'Aydie stoops to pick it up. Instead of restoring it to her, however, he clasps the knot of ribbon to his breast.

"Mademoiselle, have I your permission to cherish this souvenir of our meeting?"

"Ah, Monsieur, when you have restored to me my pearls I should be churlish indeed to refuse so small a favour."

But when he secretes the little knot of pink ribbon within his coat, and she sees him place it over his heart, a wave of delicious emotion overpowers Aïssé, and seems almost to suffocate her, so that when he kisses her hand she cannot speak. She shrinks into the corner against the cushions, then on a sudden impulse leans forward and smiles upon him, her cheeks flushed so that she more than ever resembles the rose rather than the lily to which she has so often been likened. And in her own heart she bears away the picture of Blaize d'Aydie standing bare-headed in the torch-light, which turns his flaxen hair into a golden halo and kindles a wondrous radiance in his blue eyes.

CHAPTER III

PONT DE VEYLE LEADS TRUMPS

It appears that from the very moment the Chevalier d'Aydie and Mademoiselle Aissé set eyes on each other, not only had the world changed for both, but each one was a new being. When the Chevalier went home to his lodging after parting with Aissé we learn that he raved to a certain fellow-knight, who shared it with him and had always been his closest friend and confidant, of the beautiful woman that had taken possession of his soul. He seems to have regarded her as an unearthly visitant, one whose only part in the frivolous and lustful life of Paris was to shed a sanctifying influence upon it—a being whose vocation was as that of a Saint Clare, incapable of inspiring any but the loftiest and most holy passion. In short, the ideal woman, of a quality akin to the angel, and to be regarded in a semi-devotional aspect. He was the more confirmed in this notion from what he had contrived to glean already of Aissé's past: of the manner in which she had transformed the voluptuary, Charles de Ferriol; of her refusal to become the Regent's mistress, and of the saying reported to have been uttered by the Duc d'Orléans that she was the one beautiful woman in Paris invulnerable to worldly temptation; of her gracious but persistent insensibility to the addresses of her many admirers, and of her expressed determination, which the Comtesse de Parabère had got wind of and had sent floating, that never would Aissé give herself to any man save one

Pont de Veyle Leads Trumps

whom she should love wholly, and whom she must likewise esteem.

The fellow-knight listened to d'Aydie's raptures sympathetically but not approvingly. His part it was to play the mentor, both then and later bidding d'Aydie beware of giving way to his passions, and pointing out how insidiously he might be drawn into temptation. But d'Aydie scoffed at the suggestion of temptation, or of any violation of the obligations of his knighthood in connection with so pure a being as Aissé. The fellow-knight said no more at the time, but endeavoured to turn his friend's thoughts from the woman to the occult side of religious chivalry. The name of this fellow-knight has never transpired; it is known only that he too had an emotional side in his nature, merged in his case into the pure spiritual, and evidenced by his blameless devotion for the lovely Madame Rieu, daughter of Aissé's friend in later days, Madame Calandrini—a sentiment which caused that estimable, puritanical lady all the more anxiety because of Aissé's and the Chevalier's subsequent lapse from the canons of virtue so strongly upheld by the good Madame Calandrini.

It is possible that had Aissé known Madame Calandrini earlier her love-story might have shaped itself differently.

But a word now of the Chevalier and of his chosen vocation.

Everyone knows the story of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, and of how the great Godfrey de Bouillon, the Crusader, endowed it, of the eight-pointed cross—the sign of the Order, under which every knight vowed himself to obedience, poverty and chastity, and to be a militant defender of the Cross of Christ; of how the order was closely allied to that of the Rosicrucians, and in its esoteric teaching held to many of Christian Rosencrantz's mystic tenets, the lives of its members

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïsée

being dedicated to the rights of God and of the King, to the protection of purity, innocence and mental and physical sanity.

These objects appealed strongly to the romantic and spiritual side of Blaize Marie d'Aydie's nature. He had no fancy for the ecclesiastical life, perhaps because he had seen its effect upon his brother, the crotchety, time-serving Abbé Odet Antoine d'Aydie, towards whom he did not feel any particular affection. For his other brother, Antoine, the soldier, he honestly cared, and also for his sister Marie, who married later the Marquis de Mayac de Migrè, but, as a whole, he was somewhat detached from the interests of his relations, though perhaps he, of them all, valued the honour of that old Périgord family nearest his heart. For the rest, his portion as a cadet of his house was pitifully small, but fortunately the career of a Knight of Malta, if technically implying poverty, implied also a sufficiency of funds to maintain the position fittingly. It was a rich order; there were benefices attached to it, and being, under the surface, of immense political power, its members received at every Christian court in Europe the highest consideration.

If one traces history back, one may find various occasions on which to the Knights of Malta were committed the conduct of some forlorn hope.

All these attributes of the Order of St John of Jerusalem were calculated to fire the imagination of one who loved adventure, romance, mystery, and yet had certain monastic tendencies. This particularly in the case of the young. No man might join the body after twenty-five. Once in it, to break away was no easy matter. A special dispensation had to be obtained, not only from the Pope but from the heads of the Order. The vow of chastity had not, however, greatly troubled young d'Aydie hitherto. It had never occurred to him that he might wish to marry, and though he knew that

Pont de Veyle Leads Trumps

many of his companions broke their vows, and had love affairs under the rose, he knew too that the Grand-masters usually made allowance for the frailties of human nature, and that such infractions were a question of confession and penance. It must be said of d'Aydie, notwithstanding, that he was too idealistic to be anything but clean-living.

Obviously a Knight of Malta could not be considered a *parti* from the point of view of marriage, if indeed marriage were permissible to one at all. But it can readily be understood how Aissé was attracted to this man as she had never been to any previous admirer. Easy to see also how naturally each might idealise the other and deceive him or herself. Not that the Chevalier ever had any base intention of deceiving Aissé. All that happened came out of the inevitable touching of two beings destined to be one. They were the complements of each other, and the Chevalier was insensibly carried away by the girl's exquisite responsiveness to every note he struck.

For, under its outward coldness, Aissé's temperament was a warm one—perhaps the most dangerously warm there can possibly be. We know that by the laws which rule the pairs of opposites, where they meet in equal proportion they at once counteract and coalesce. For instance, plunge your hand into ice-cold water and soon there will be a sensation as of fire running through the flesh. So in all keen stress of emotion. The most intense pleasure becomes pain after a certain point; intense pain after a certain point gives a feeling of almost pleasure, and beyond that point ceases to be felt at all.

Then again, touching the laws of human vibration, every individual is strung to a certain key, tuned to a certain note, can only vibrate up to a certain octave, can only respond to a corresponding rate of vibration. This law manifests in the physical as in the tempera-

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

mental, the last meaning the keynote of the lower soul, and chiefly, of course, depending upon the stage of development of the ego itself.

But neither Aïssé nor the Chevalier reasoned on these things, which it is not given to all to understand.

Here, in Aïssé's case, we have a woman of Oriental birth and warm Eastern heredity, of refined and beautiful physique—the magnet of the flesh fully charged; moreover, a nature of keen sensibility, pitched above the ordinary key, and lastly of high religious development, than which nothing quickens more surely the capacity for emotion. Thus she was ripe for conquest by the fore-ordained mate, and being of a pure, unsullied and, at the same time, ice-hot temperament, it is plain that she would take readily the right impress when it came.

As an unstained sheet, duly prepared for the action of the sun, gives a vivid picture in minutest detail; as the rippling face of the sea reflects a myriad rays when the wind breaks it into many waves, so when the calm mirror of Aïssé's nature became stirred by the wind of passion did it reflect not only the clear image of this man, but reflected it in, as it were, a thousand facets, in every thought and act, every beat of her heart, every pulse of her being.

For days after Madame du Defland's party Aïssé still seemed to be living in a dream. The glow on her face, and her absorbed manner, might have betrayed her secret even to an observer whose eyes were not sharpened by affection. The Ambassador, condemned to his couch, his thoughts and interests centering round Aïssé, and always at the back of his mind the man's love for the woman which, though transmuted, had never been destroyed, was quick to perceive the change and to date it from that night. But he said nothing at first, though he suspected the cause, and the suspicion was a knife in his heart. He waited and waited,



Pont de Veyle Leads Trumps

helpless log that he was, battling with himself, knowing too well that only in his helplessness lay the root of his resignation, and that the thought of another possessing Aïssé was the bitterest pain that even now could come upon him.

Well did this Eastern potentate know the signs of love. A disease of the senses, its symptoms can nevertheless be diagnosed as definitely as those of any other disease of the human system. By her sudden flushings, her absent-mindedness, her alternating depression and high spirits, Charles de Ferriol judged that Aïssé had caught the fever.

But still he asked no question, possessing his soul in such patience as he could command.

A chance word from Voltaire, who dropped in upon the Ambassador a day or two after Madame du Deffand's reception, gave him the clue he wanted, and he followed it eagerly. He had been listening with languid interest to "the little rat's" biting sarcasms upon various of Madame du Deffand's guests, notably the ladies who had overwhelmed the Chevalier with their attentions. He stopped short at the episode of the broken chain, but the Ambassador promptly inquired if the Chevalier had shown any particular admiration of Mademoiselle Aïssé.

"*Mordieu!*" replied Voltaire, "it is well for Mademoiselle Aïssé that *La Joufflotte* is not alive this day, for there would certainly be a *lettre de cachet* consigning her or her Chevalier to the Bastille."

The Ambassador inquired no further, and when Voltaire perceived the grim change which came over the old man's face it occurred to him that he had better have held his peace. He adroitly changed the subject to the Regent's last infatuation—Madame d'Averne—and to some scandal that had floated through the portals of the Hôtel de Bouillon as to the later doings there on that same evening. Then, seeing that he evoked no

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

response from the Ambassador, he shortly took his leave.

The old man lay in silence, devouring the thought that his ewe lamb might be taken from him. For although he knew naturally the rules of the Order to which d'Aydie belonged, he also knew that had he been a Knight of Malta and had loved Aïssé, and been so happy as to gain her love in return, no vow of chastity should have kept him from making her his own.

Another visitor following on Voltaire—no other than Madame du Deffand herself, who often came in during Aïssé's daily outings to enjoy a chat with the old cynic—confirmed Voltaire's jesting report. Handsome d'Aydie's conquest of the fair Circassian had been too evident not to give rise to comment in their set.

An incident on the day following disquieted the Ambassador still further.

The Chevalier d'Aydie called in person, and, after the fashion of the day, sent up a tasteful bouquet tied with pale pink ribbon, and with it a little card, and a courteous message that he trusted Mademoiselle Aïssé had recovered from her fatigues of the evening upon which he had had the honour of making her acquaintance. No more. He did not ask to see her. The flowers were brought to Aïssé while she sat at her embroidery-frame by the Ambassador's side. He noted her quick blush, and how she hid her face from his scrutiny, bending it over the bouquet which was of roses and lilies, and inhaling tenderly the fragrance of the blossoms.

A sense of vague uneasiness came over her at the silence of the Ambassador, for he made no comment upon the present or its donor. But she busied herself in getting a vase and water, and in arranging the flowers, which she placed on a table at the foot of the Ambassador's couch, so that he might have the pleasure of looking at them. Still he said nothing, and it was a

Pont de Veyle Leads Trumps

relief to Aïssé when at the moment, Pont de Veyle was announced. Making an excuse to leave the uncle and nephew together, Aïssé shortly departed to her own chamber. But she kept one rosebud from d'Aydie's bouquet and placed it in her bosom.

Pont de Veyle saluted the Ambassador with much deference, inquiring courteously after his health, and delivering an affectionate message from his mother, whom he described as not very well and rather depressed in spirits. There was something a little portentous in Pont de Veyle's allusions to Madame de Ferriol, and the sensitive Aïssé detected in them a veiled reproach against herself. She had realised of late that both Pont de Veyle and d'Argental blamed her for Madame de Ferriol's frequent fits of depression. She knew well that the boys loved their mother dearly and had her interests closely at heart. Pont de Veyle more especially because she was *his* mother, and in her the honour of his family had to be maintained. He could not forget that Aïssé had come, a mere dependant, into their house, and much desired that his uncle should be brought to a sense of due proportion concerning her claims upon him before it was too late. For Pont de Veyle, *lecteur du roi*, and a long-headed young gentleman, had an eye to the fact that the Ambassador was old, and that though a large part of his income died with him, he would yet leave a sufficient sum to keep either Aïssé or Madame de Ferriol in comfort, but not both.

Now Pont de Veyle had called to-day with the express object of bringing his uncle round to a reasonable view of the situation. Essentially *dilettante*, he found the task distasteful, and the Ambassador's grim face was not encouraging. But the matter was too serious to be ignored. Pont de Veyle had been bitterly wounded by the remark concerning his mother's poverty that he had overheard at Madame du Deffand's reception, and he was in reality highly resentful of

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

Aïssé's too evident prosperity. Here was the slave going about in silks and satins, admired by all, while it was perfectly true that Madame de Ferriol was unable to afford suitable gowns or means of conveyance.

Looking round the apartment Pont de Veyle felt a shrewd suspicion that the Ambassador was living below his income for the purpose of leaving Aïssé amply provided. There certainly seemed a considerable difference between the scale of the Ambassador's expenditure in his new abode and that which it had been at the Hôtel de Ferriol. These rooms were smaller, less luxuriously appointed, the establishment had been greatly reduced; appearing limited to Benoît, the Ambassador's faithful factotum, Aïssé's maid, and a couple of underlings. The Ambassador never went out now, and Aïssé's chair was the only sort of coach they kept. There must be accumulations, thought Pont de Veyle as he sat waiting his opportunity for direct explanation, and meanwhile feeling his way with politely tentative remarks.

They made an interesting picture, the old *roué* and the young model of masculine propriety.

Charles de Ferriol, stretched on his invalid couch, paralysed to his middle, was the wreck of a finer man than his nephew with all his virtues and all his polish could ever be. One saw the remains of a dominant personality in the nervous hands, so like a great bird's claws, in the wizened face, the beaked nose, the eagle eyes, which, every now and then, would send forth a disconcerting flash, and in the ironic smile that curled the loose lips and seemed to restore to them something of their former firmness.

Pont de Veyle, leaning forward a little in his high-backed chair, one black-silk-stockinged leg crossed over the other, every detail of his black costume—ruffles, cambric, dull-chased silver buttons—all perfect, felt the gall of his position, and deserves sympathy with the

Pont de Veyle Leads Trumps

filial feeling that had spurred him to this uncongenial effort. His handsome sallow face was slightly sullen in expression; he hugged his knee with one arm, and his eyes were downcast as he tried to drive home to his uncle the discomforts to which his mother was put by reason of his father's misfortunes.

The Ambassador, roused at last from his absorption in Aissé, replied cynically that if lean years had followed the fat ones in the Hôtel de Ferriol it had not been for want of a warning Joseph. His brother and sister would, he said, have avoided the misfortunes which had befallen them had they paid attention to a letter he had himself written them from Constantinople long ago, in which he advised the Président to regulate his business affairs, retrench his establishment and retire from finance lest he be called to account later for reckless expenditure of monies placed at his discretion by the late king.

At which Pont de Veyle was likewise roused to plainer speech.

"It is not for me, sir, to criticise my parents' actions, and I can only regret that they did not take advantage of your Excellency's wise counsels. But I would suggest that our style of living at the Hôtel de Ferriol, during what you are pleased to term the fat years, was regulated by my mother in accordance with your Excellency's own wishes as to the maintenance of your—ward—Mademoiselle Aissé." Pont de Veyle made the faintest satirical pause before the designation.

The Ambassador's fingers crisped upon the coverlet, and his eyes blazed ominously.

"Mademoiselle Aissé can be left out of the question," he said sharply. "So long as she remained under your mother's roof her maintenance was liberally paid for."

"It was scarcely a matter of actual disbursement," proceeded Pont de Veyle, boldly. "It is true that the

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

respect and regard in which my mother has always held your Excellency may perhaps have prompted her to overstep prudence in her desire to comply with your wishes."

The Ambassador was looking at him grimly, but Pont de Veyle went on:

"It must be evident to your Excellency that my mother's pride and heart have been severely wounded by your removal with Aïssé from the Hôtel de Ferriol."

"It was necessary," said the Ambassador, in a decisive tone. "Your mother understands."

"That may be, sir, but none the less do her sons feel for her the position in which she is placed. I would ask you to remember, my uncle, that by birth and marriage my mother is naturally entitled to comforts she is now compelled to deny herself. I am the more troubled in that regard," Pont de Veyle added diplomatically, "because at present neither my brother nor I are able to render her pecuniary assistance. Your Excellency is aware that I paid a rather heavy sum to the Abbé de Vaubrun for the privilege and advantage of *entrée* to the king as *lecteur du roi*."

The Ambassador, who had approved of this step, nodded. "You have done well; the money is not ill spent."

"Nevertheless, the outlay will hamper me for a considerable time. My brother d'Argental is in like case. We are forced therefore to deplore my mother's lack of suitable provision should anything happen to my father—who is so many years older than she is—and also in case of the demise of your Excellency—though may that long be averted—who has always held her welfare at heart, but who may"—Pont de Veyle again made a slight but pregnant pause—"who may have come to regard ties by blood of less account than those of adoption."

"You mean that I may regard the claim of my

Pont de Veyle Leads Trumps

adopted daughter before that of my brother and his family," retorted the Ambassador. He silenced Pont de Veyle with a laboured gesture of his feeble hand, and said nothing more for several moments. His face looked very dour, but suddenly its dourness changed, and his eyes softened with a rush of tenderness. His ear had caught the sound of Aïssé's returning step.

"You have put your case plainly enough, good nephew. I do not blame your anxiety concerning my testamentary dispositions. On the contrary, I will think over what you have said before I finally conclude them. But let me assure you that justice will be done, and though, as you must be aware, my heirs will not have a rich reversion, such money as I have to leave will be left in the quarter where it is best deserved."

Pont de Veyle stooped and deferentially kissed the old man's hand. As Aïssé entered the room he rose, and with a compliment upon her blooming looks stood aside while she went up to the Ambassador's couch. Bending over him she made some tender inquiry as to his comfort. Moved by an irresistible impulse of affection, he put his hand up caressingly to her shoulder and held her close to him.

The sight did not please Pont de Veyle. He interpreted that caress as the Ambassador's answer to his pleading. He turned to conceal his chagrin, when his eye was caught by the bouquet near the couch.

"Your assiduous lady friends send you pretty offerings, my uncle. Shall I be near the mark if I guess that these flowers are either from the du Deffand or the de Parabère?"

The Ambassador shook his head. Holding Aïssé's hand in one of his own, he patted it tremblingly with the other, and his voice quavered as he answered:

"From neither, nephew. Those flowers are a gift to Aïssé."

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

Pont de Veyle noted Aïssé's blush and could not resist taking a petty revenge. "Then I make another guess, and this time I'll wager 'tis a better one." He bowed in gallant fashion to the girl, who flushed a yet deeper rose.

"I congratulate you, my dear sister, upon the conquest about which everybody was talking the other night. Many fair ladies have tried to capture the heart of Chevalier d'Aydie. But *you* evidently succeeded. A pity that he may only love in theory, not in fact—since he is a Knight of Malta."

"A Knight of Malta!" repeated Aïssé in a hushed tone. So the Chevalier *sans peur et sans reproche* of whom she had dreamed, and who had come into her life at last, was one vowed to celibacy!

"Ah, you did not know it?" exclaimed Pont de Veyle.

She was woman of the world enough to answer at once:

"I should have known it if I had troubled myself to think; but I scarcely noticed the orders that he wore."

"Your mind was full of the broken chain—eh? Are all the pearls safe, Aïssé?"

"Yes," she answered.

The Ambassador pricked up his ears. Pont de Veyle continued mercilessly: "Voltaire made out that there was something symbolic in that sudden breaking of the chain. It was the chain of gold and pearls which you gave Aïssé, sir, and which she always wears."

A tremor passed through all that was alive of the old man's frame. His lips mouthed an oath. He withdrew his hand abruptly from that of the girl.

"The chain—I—gave you," he muttered. He turned his head towards her. "Aïssé, did you break my chain?"

"Alas! yes, *mon* Aga. It was an accident."

Pont de Veyle Leads Trumps

"Which occurred as the Chevalier d'Aydie was about to be presented to her," put in Pont de Veyle. "Voltaire made a quatrain on it," he pursued with honeyed malignity, which had in it a touch of the ex-nun, his aunt. "Very quaint and pretty. He showed it to the Chevalier."

"Voltaire made a quatrain on it," repeated de Ferriol, bitterly. "Very quaint and pretty, and he showed it to the Chevalier—*mon Dieu!*"

"Yes, get the Chevalier to read it to you, Aïssé," continued Pont de Veyle. "He has a copy. The bonds of years snapped in an instant—that was the idea—and the knight—conquering and conquered—gathering up and cherishing the broken links. Charmingly suggestive—eh? Worthy of Voltaire's fancy. But any tag will serve a professional rhymist."

Neither Aïssé nor the Ambassador answered a word.

"Well, I must be going on my way," said Pont de Veyle. "Adieu, my dear sister. Adieu, Monsieur *mon Oncle*. My mother will be rejoiced to hear that you are better."

Pont de Veyle bowed himself out. Aïssé and the Ambassador were left alone.

The old man drew her down beside him. She had not thought there was so much strength in his hands. The look in his eyes was like that of a wounded animal.

"So you broke my chain, Aïssé?"

She tried to make light of the matter, but her blushes betrayed her and she hid her face against the cushions of the couch.

"I have all the pearls, *mon Aga*. They can be strung afresh."

"Can they?" he said.

"Surely, *mon Aga*; I have the links of gold, too. I shall take them to a goldsmith, and the chain will be as good again. It was careless of me; I am very sorry about it."

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

"Aïssé is not usually careless. What were you doing?"

"I do not know," she faltered. "My hands were on the chain and—it snapped."

"At the moment, as Pont de Veyle said, that you first saw d'Aydie?"

Very gently de Ferriol put his hand under her chin and forced her eyes to his. They shone like stars. A dimness came over his own; his hand dropped; his head turned on the pillow; she heard the catch in his breath. Then there was silence—a long silence, during which the Ambassador made his last renunciation. "Was it so, Aïssé?" he said at length.

"*Mon* Aga, it was so. I cannot tell why or how."

"But *I* can," he murmured. "Ay! the gold links can be mended and the pearls can be re-strung, but the chain will never be quite the same again—nor the bond between thee and me, Aïssé. If thou and I were separated—"

"But we shall *not* be separated," she cried. "Only death can part thee from me, my Aga."

"Death is coming very near," he answered. "Half of me has he claimed this many a day. Thank Death's forerunner—this paralysis, sweetheart. It has been thy protection, Aïssé," and his anguished eyes sought hers again imploringly.

"Hast thou forgiven my madness of long ago? Have I atoned enough? Have I faithfully redeemed my promise to be to thee as thy true father, oh, my more than child?"

She gave a convulsive nod of her head.

"My love has been very great for thee, my dear—more than the love of any ordinary father, for it has in it all the purified elements of a stronger and closer love still. Thou wilt never know how deeply I have loved thee. Nevertheless, I have done what I could to secure thy future welfare and to give thee happiness as thou

Pont de Veyle Leads Trumps

mayst choose. 'This thou wilt know when I am gone. But now—I ask a recompense—one thing only in return for the love I have borne thee and such service as I have shown thee since I bought thee as a babe. My unstained lily! thou art free to give thyself as thy heart may prompt. I only ask this boon, and feel assured that thou wilt grant it me."

"Ask, my Aga. It is granted."

"Then do not leave me, Aïssé. That is all I beg. It is only for a little while. The old man cannot linger very long now. And thou hast known the best—ay, and the worst of him. For these many years he has had no greater desire than for thee and thy happiness. Give him in return the solace of thy sweet companionship, the sunlight of thy presence until all earthly lights go out and the eternal darkness falls on Charles de Ferriol."

"*Mon Aga!*—oh, *mon Aga!*—my utmost gratitude, my tenderness and devotion—all are yours."

"But not the one thing, Aïssé, which could never have been mine. The love which, for him who wins it, will one day make a paradise. May justice requite that man, my dear, according unto his dealings towards thee."

The Ambassador's grasp tightened feverishly upon Aïssé's fingers. "Thou wilt not leave me while I live. Promise me—promise—Aïssé."

"I promise," she answered solemnly,

His strained attention relaxed.

"Now I am ready to go when the hour comes," he said in a satisfied manner.

CHAPTER IV

THE MUEZZIN'S CALL

THE Ambassador talked freely of d'Aydie and his family later on.

"Tell me about this latest conquest of thine, Aïssé. It appears to have set all the tongues of Madame du Deffand's *salon* wagging."

She hesitated, but he urged her. "Tell your old father, my dear."

"There is little to tell, *mon père*," she answered, pandering to his mood, "except that M. le Chevalier d'Aydie is a very fine gentleman who was kind enough to pay some attention to thy humble Aïssé."

"*Vrai Dieu!* The man showed sound judgment when he singled out *la belle Circassienne*, the loveliest woman there, I warrant. I must see this *preux Chevalier* of thine, Aïssé. I knew his uncle on the mother's side—handsome Foucauld de Sainte-Aulaire, a Knight of Malta likewise. And I had some acquaintance with the Marquise de Laxion, whom I met at Marly in the days of the Grande Monarque—she was a d'Aydie of the Riberac branch. So is Madame la Marquise de Bonnac—wife of my rival and successor at the Porte. Pont de Veyle should apply for that post when de Bonnac's term is ended—a word from me to Maurepas might gain it, for, mind me, Aïssé, I have some influence yet. Yes, the Marquise de Bonnac, if my memory serves, is of the Riberac-d'Aydie-Bautru-Nogent connection. A woman of good presence—as all the d'Aydies are. Thou rememberest her in old days at the Hôtel de Ferriol."

The Muezzin's Call

Thus the Ambassador rambled on as old men are apt to do, a new interest quickly effacing the old, so that he forgot in fascinating retrospect the pangs of recent hours.

" . . . A good old Bearnois stock, the d'Aydis of Périgord! Poor and proud—royal blood in them, too, through their ancestor, the Bastard of Foix. In a sense, Bourbons by the left hand—you understand, Aïssé? *Bismillah!* how should you understand, my innocent lily-maid! Ay! thou art what I bade my sister-in-law keep thee." And he gazed at the girl with a tender, far-away look in his eyes—a vague trouble likewise. His mind sometimes wandered in these days, when he would seem plunged into the past. "Thou dost not wear the white frock and the crimson sash," he said suddenly. "I like to see thee in them."

The girl reddened and then went very white.

"My Aga has forgotten," she said. "That dress was worn out long ago. Aïssé could not wear it now, for it was a frock for a little maid. Aïssé has grown older since, and is no longer what she was then. But perhaps all is best as it is, for one should grow wise as one grows old; and whatsoever has been, or may be, thine Aïssé can never forget that all she has came from thee."

She pressed her lips to his forehead as she spoke and the sweet compunction of the caress smoothed the lines from his puckered brow and brought a look of comfort to his face.

The Ambassador's wish to see the Chevalier d'Aydie was shortly fulfilled. A day or two later Aïssé was beside his couch, he holding her hand in his while she read aloud to him a letter she had just received from her dear Marquise de Villette—now by courtesy, if not in legal fact, Madame de Bolingbroke—telling of additions they had been making to their new home, the Château de la Source, at the head of the lovely

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

little river Loiret. They were at the description of the Bassin du Miroir when Benoît came in with another letter.

"For Mademoiselle Aïssé, from the Chevalier d'Aydie, who waits below."

Madame de Bolingbroke's letter fell from Aïssé's hand and the Ambassador withdrew his own and bade her read what d'Aydie said.

"Monsieur le Chevalier has not paid us the compliment of bringing his letter himself, Benoît?" asked the old man.

"But yes, your Excellency; M. le Chevalier requested that Mademoiselle would have the graciousness to read his letter and send him a message in reply."

Aïssé broke the wax and unfolded the little missive. As she read it the colour rose to her very temples. She handed it silently to the Ambassador, who scanned the few lines and nodded. She turned to Benoît.

"Tell M. le Chevalier d'Aydie that His Excellency the Comte de Ferriol and Mademoiselle Aïssé will be charmed to receive him if he will give himself the trouble to mount."

Aïssé rose, re-arranging the Ambassador's cushions and coverlet, but no word passed between them as they waited for their visitor.

Whatever impression d'Aydie had kept of Aïssé in her brocade and paniers as the rose-queen of a Parisian drawing-room, he now beheld her under a totally different aspect. Here was a young girl—seeming much younger than she really was—clad in a straight, simple grey gown, in garb more like an English Puritan than a lady of the French Regency. On her head, only partly hiding her dark wavy hair, was a little white satin *coif* edged with fine lace; a lace-edged lawn kerchief covered her neck; from her sleeves, reaching to the elbow, fell lace ruffles, out of which came her satiny arms and dimpled hands. A white

The Muezzin's Call

lace and muslin apron, with little housewifely pockets, gave a touch of womanly domesticity. Her manner was very retiring and demure, though she received the young man with perfect ease and breeding. When the conversation with the Ambassador was launched she took up her embroidery-frame and plied her needle, sitting in her usual place near the head of Monsieur de Ferriol's couch, while d'Aydie occupied a chair, facing the old man, at its foot.

D'Aydie looked handsomer and more distinctive than even in his dress of ceremony, clad as he now was in sober habiliments of dark buff. On his breast was the eight-pointed badge, at his side the short cross-handled sword. More than ever did he seem the *preux chevalier* of romance, with his curling golden hair, blue eyes, clean-cut features and excessively fair skin. Well-formed, stately and tall, there was yet a certain delicacy in his physique that heightened the impression he gave of spirituality, and in which was a hint of the chest trouble which assailed him in later years. His manner and bearing, through the florid gallantry that was the mode of the day, gave a suggestion of aloofness from the commoner mundane interests; the note, in fact, of a higher calling—a knightly mission to defend the good and fight the wrong, that was calculated to stir the imagination and appeal to the soul of such a woman as Aïssé.

In his address of her there was a certain reverential diffidence—an almost religious homage, curiously blended with the courtliness prevailing in the best society of the day; so that when he kissed the girl's trembling hand, his own fingers placed beneath her palm trembled also, and the kiss savoured rather of homage to a saint than of the salutation of a man of the world to a lady whom he admired.

For the first few minutes the Ambassador said little but watched the pair—the young man in particular—

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

out of those keen eyes in which there was an indescribable expression alternating between resignation, fierce inquiry, resentment and vague satisfaction; instinctive animosity on the one hand, and yearning tenderness as they turned from the Chevalier to Aïssé.

The girl took bravely upon herself at first the burden of conversation, showing an aplomb and discretion which might have convinced d'Aydie that this adorable angel was by no means an unsophisticated dweller in his own social sphere. She had all the light small-talk ready at her tongue's end—apt comments on the guests at Madame du Deffand's; a kindly hint as to the conjugal compact of amicable separation arrived at between the Marquis and the Marquise; the latest news—literary and political—of the Bolingbrokes, of the English Pretender at Bar and the lost Stuart Cause which naturally, a defender of divine right and of the Holy Catholic creed, he had at heart; of the health of the Regent; the late mission to Rome of M. the Archbishop of Embrun, and the bestowal of the cardinalate on Dubois; the recent *début* of a young opera singer called la Pelissier, a singer with enchanting little airs and a sweet, thin voice, and the jealousy and chagrins of her rivals—la Antier and la Le Maure. Gradually the Ambassador grew more genial, and as he did so Aïssé tactfully retired into the background of talk. D'Aydie was charming to his host. Soon the Ambassador appeared at his best, and even still Charles de Ferriol at his best was a man who pleased. He had kept the polish of his earlier years in diplomacy, and drew out the Chevalier, talking freely of his young days when he had known the d'Aydie in Périgord. He spoke of the de Bonnacs also; of the Chevalier de Sainte-Aulaire, d'Aydie's uncle, and inquired cordially after the health of Madame d'Aydie, the Chevalier's mother. D'Aydie, if disappointed at not finding Mademoiselle Aïssé alone, had no reason for regret, and certainly showed none. When, after an

The Muezzin's Call

unduly prolonged visit, he rose to take his leave, the Ambassador pressed him warmly to come again soon.

And so it happened that during this winter of 1721-22 d'Aydie came, at first two or three times a week, and then almost daily, to the apartment of the Ambassador and Aïssé. It was part of the old man's diplomacy, realising as he did the inevitable passion growing between these two, to encourage d'Aydie's visits, for he reasoned that since the magnet was bound to draw the needle, it was better the intercourse should take place under his own eyes rather than run the chance of more dangerous developments in secret.

Thus, while Aïssé bent over her embroidery frame at the head of the Ambassador's couch, the Chevalier would gaze at her furtively from his usual chair at the foot. Sometimes their eyes would meet, and a sudden rapture would seize and envelop them both, no words being needed for them to assure each other that the one was an incomplete being without the other. It was a union of souls, in which, for long, the higher principles utterly subdued the lower, until the irresistible revelation came that in pure passion of the one man and the one woman there is neither higher nor lower, but a perfect blending on every plane of being of the two into the one.

They moved and spoke in a celestial world of their own, these two, even while their bodies inhabited prosaic earth, and they listened with their ears to the old man's rambling stories and dissertations, his voice growing daily weaker, his speech thicker, his hands more nerveless. And they would unite in their common tendance on and thought for him, d'Aydie collecting the news that he knew would please the dying man, bringing letters from the de Bonnacs at Constantinople, and sweetmeats and scented tobacco from the East, that he procured through them; while Aïssé made Turkish coffee, and, on occasions, put on her Turkish costume

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

again and brought out her narghileh to make for her Aga some little fresh distraction.

It was the happiest time in all Aïssé's life, perhaps, too, in that of the Chevalier. He could be constantly with the woman he loved, under the most tender and blamelessly intimate conditions. While the Ambassador lived there could be no bar of convention nor sting of conscience in the sweet domesticity of their associations. The womanliness of Aïssé, in her care of the old man and untiring self-sacrifice for his comfort, was inconceivably precious to d'Aydie, and qualified his passion with a peculiar respect and regard. The fellow-knight could find no fault at that time with the sentiments of his friend towards this human saint whom d'Aydie adored.

In the early spring of 1722 a crisis of events, including the death of the Grand-master of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, called the Chevalier d'Aydie from Paris. The notice of his recall came suddenly; he had only a few hours in which to make his preparations and say his farewells.

When Aïssé heard the news it was as if her sun had sunk never to rise again. The fact was brought home to her that she had given her heart irrevocably to a man who had no control over his own life, but must always submit to the commands of the Grand-master of his Order. However much he might desire to make her his wife—though Aïssé, in the self-abasement of her love, had not considered that contingency—it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for him to do so. Only in very exceptional circumstances, and for the political benefit or aggrandisement of the Order was a dispensation likely to be granted. Perhaps a princess allied to some royal house might obtain it, or a great lady supported by high ecclesiastical influence. But Aïssé had no delusions concerning her own doubtful status in society. She had been made to feel it by the

The Muezzin's Call

relatives of the Prince de Bournonville, and by those of other noble suitors. Moreover, the case of the Comte de Bautru-Nogent was a standing illustration of the consequences of trying to introduce a nameless Circassian slave into one of the old aristocratic families of France.

These thoughts flashed through her, as they naturally would through the mind of a woman who had acquired some little worldly wisdom during a long apprenticeship in the de Ferriol *ménage*. But upon her relations with d'Aydie they had no practical bearing. She loved him; she could never love any other man; her fate was fixed. Aissé did not deceive herself as to the nature of her feelings; ice-hot temperaments like hers are recklessly truthful when once stirred to genuine passion. Yet hers was a passion of the soul; she looked for no material consummation; she would have been shocked at the suggestion. In her eyes the Chevalier appeared a sort of legendary Knight of the Grail, like him who descended to the aid of a perfectly pure and trusting maiden—according to the mystic tradition cherished in its esoteric meaning among the Rosicrucian brotherhoods of the Middle Ages, and later embodied by Wagner in the story of *Lohengrin*. This variant rendering of the old Pagan myth of Cupid and Psyche was, as d'Aydie's friend, the fellow-knight, more advanced than himself, was fully aware, included in the inner occult teaching imparted in the higher grades of the Order of St John of Jerusalem. D'Aydie, under the influence of his friend, had himself vaguely grasped the spiritual meaning of this idea, and, in talks with her lover, Aissé had vaguely grasped it also, and fancied she saw its embodiment in the Chevalier, though neither of them were as yet ripe for the true comprehension of the story.

Thus however she regarded d'Aydie as so far above her that merely to know that he held her dear was enough to give her a sense of absolute bliss. She asked

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

no more than her hero's tender regard. How could she count upon more?

It was late when d'Aydie came. Aïssé in her white dress, her face wan and shadowed beneath her night-black hair, looked, in the dim lamp-light of the *salon*, like some pale spirit wrung by mortal anguish. Her hand was cold, the nerves of it fluttered when he pressed his lips upon it. Neither of them spoke.

The Ambassador called fretfully from his couch. It had been a bad day with him. Like many sick old men he was often selfish and querulous. He was thinking now of his own disappointment in losing someone who had made life pleasanter to him.

The Chevalier came close and bent his head low to hear the feeble voice. De Ferriol seemed to assume that he and he only was the object of d'Aydie's visit.

"My friend," he said, "you come to bid me farewell; it is for ever. The candles flicker in their sockets. Soon for Charles de Ferriol all will be darkness and oblivion. *Eh bien!*" and he gave his inimitable shrug.

"Monsieur, you are not alone. *Le bon Dieu* has sent an angel to your bedside in bestowing upon you the tender care of Mademoiselle Aïssé."

"Nevertheless," said the cynical old Ambassador, "I should have felt better inclined to believe in the existence of *le bon Dieu* had he permitted me the consolation of keeping you also beside me to the last."

"I would to God," replied the Chevalier, "that I might remain in Paris to render you and Mademoiselle Aïssé such small consolation as I can. But I must obey my chiefs. So now I may only thank your Excellency with a full heart for your many kindnesses to me, and for your generous trust."

The old man smiled, his queer, ironic smile. Involuntarily the glance of both men turned towards Aïssé, who at that moment was passing out through a curtained doorway leading to a small ante-room, so that the

The Muezzin's Call

Ambassador might say his farewell to the Chevalier unhampered by her presence.

"My trust!" repeated M. de Ferriol. "By Allah and his prophet, Chevalier, more like it had been an honest sword-to-sword trial between you and me, rather than feigned trust, could these dead limbs have stood up to the duel. Listen! You said truly that I had an angel by my bedside. If indeed there be such beings then surely Aïssé is one of them. But even angels need better protection sometimes than their own robe of purity."

"Monsieur may rest assured that in me at least Mademoiselle Aïssé may ever count upon a loyal friend."

The Ambassador's fiery eyes—brown with yellow spots in their iris—shot forth a sudden flash, and the loose lips twisted in a stridulous laugh.

"*Pardieu*, Chevalier, my experience of human nature has taught me that a man protesting loyal friendship is often a beautiful girl's worst enemy."

D'Aydie's fair face reddened.

"Monsieur! the word of a Knight of St John should be sufficient guarantee of loyalty."

"That may be," returned the Ambassador. "I have no wish, Chevalier, to place a doubt upon your honour. But Aïssé's beauty has power, and I have yet to learn that a Knight of Malta is more—or less—than man."

The Chevalier bit his lip. He seemed to be struggling against a passionate impulse to which he did not wish to give expression in words. All the while those hard bright eyes of the Ambassador were fixed questioningly upon his face. D'Aydie held out his hand and took the old man's bony fingers.

"Farewell, Monsieur. May God have Aïssé in his keeping, and may your passage hence, since come it must, be smooth and easy. I say no more. The end shall answer for itself."

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

"The end—which these eyes will not see. No matter. If the world be only a gigantic soap-bubble, as some philosophers say, at anyrate it gives us this advantage—that the end is nothingness, and life, with all its disappointments, no more than a troubled dream."

The men looked at each other in silence, holding hands. Then d'Aydie bent his knee beside the Ambassador's couch and kissed the claw-like fingers. It was a last act of homage—that homage which one pays to a corpse. He rose, saluted in a deep, formal reverence, and passed out through the curtained door. Beyond it Aïssé was awaiting him.

* * * * *

Following upon the Chevalier's departure the Ambassador had a seizure which reduced his strength to its lowest ebb. Well perhaps for Aïssé that she was required to tend him closely. The Ambassador's mind was comparatively clear now; he was able to look into business affairs, and it was known in the de Ferriol family that he was either making or altering his testamentary provisions.

Pont de Veyle flattered himself that his conversation with his uncle was bearing fruit. He counselled his mother to go and see her brother-in-law, and Madame de Ferriol came often and sat by his bedside. Her visits pleased the Ambassador; he had been greatly attached to his brother's wife in former years, and in spite of the change in her—for Madame de Ferriol had grown caustic and embittered, had lost much of her elegance and charm, and was developing the avarice and acrimonious temper that were so trying to her family in her later years—he could not forget how he had once liked and admired her. It is the way of the old to hark back to the past and to make less account of the present. When Madame de Ferriol, advised by her subtler sister, in order to draw from the old man some announcement of his intentions, professed sorrow for the unprotected

The Muezzin's Call

condition in which Aïssé would find herself at his death, he did not give the information she wanted, but extracted a promise from his brother's wife that during Aïssé's life, or until the girl married, the Hôtel de Ferriol should be her home. Madame de Ferriol willingly gave the promise, inferring from her brother-in-law's request that Aïssé's future provision would be left to her generosity and that she and her family would be the inheritors under the Ambassador's will.

To all such practical considerations Aïssé herself was quite indifferent. Her mind was absorbed in thoughts of the Chevalier and in grief at the prospect of losing her protector. Moreover, she was no woman of business, and a lack of worldly prudence and foresight had always been her chiefest drawback. She was surprised and deeply touched therefore, when one evening, as she sat alone with him, the Ambassador bade her open a drawer of his *escritoire* and bring him a sealed envelope she would find therein.

He endorsed it with his own hand and signature, which he called *Bénoit* in to witness, stating that he had, on this date mentioned, given the contents of the sealed envelope in free gift to his dear adopted daughter Aïssé, baptized Charlotte Elizabeth in the parish church of St Roch in the year 1698, she being ignorant of the nature of the packet and requested not to open it until after his demise.

When *Bénoit* had left the room de Ferriol told Aïssé to take the packet away and lock it up in a secure place.

"It is thy *dot*, Aïssé, if thou shouldst marry, and if thou shouldst not marry it will secure thee independence and comfort in thy old age," he said. "Understand, child, it is thine—my poor return to thee for all the sweet care thou hast given me in these ten years and more past. Do with it as thou wilt. I lay no restrictions upon thee."

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

She remembered these words later—alack! to her detriment. Now she kissed him and thanked him, and tried to turn his thoughts from such matters, but he went on.

“I have secured thee, Aïssé, so far as I felt to be just. Thou wilt have a yearly income—not large—but sufficient to supply thy needs. And thy home will be in my brother’s house, where all thy childhood was passed. I have agreed upon this with my sister-in-law, who in her heart loves thee. Child, how could she do else? But the de Tencin woman—whom thou hadst best avoid so far as possible—has jaundiced her nature and she is not what she used to be. *Pauvre Angelique!*” mused the Ambassador, “life has gone very hardly with her, and my brother has not known the way to make her happy. Bear her no ill-will, Aïssé. I have done what I could for her, but it is not much, for it seemed to me that the first duty was to release my brother from certain honourable debts that weigh upon his conscience. Hence I have less to leave, and I fear that my nephews and their mother will feel some disappointment. As for Pont de Veyle—it is a sagacious youth who will reflect nothing but credit upon his family. I would that I could have done something for d’Argental, who has ever been my favourite. Send for that lad, Aïssé. He has been remiss of late in visiting the old uncle. But his mother tells me that he works all day at the Chamber of Justice where he sits, and that his only recreation is to hear la Pelissier, about whom he is mad, and who scorns him beside his wealthier rivals. Nevertheless, send for him, Aïssé, tell him the old uncle wishes to bid him farewell.”

So Aïssé wrote to d’Argental, and the young man came. Launched on his new career in Paris, and with the hot blood of youth in him justling for pleasure, he had not paid much attention of late either to his uncle or his adopted sister. But he had a good heart—d’Argental—

The Muezzin's Call

and when he came out from the Ambassador's chamber he was weeping like a child.

"I have promised him, Aïssé, that I will be a better brother to thee," he said. "And I vow that I will keep my word. But I am an addle-pated fellow, who finds it hard work to earn his bread. And after my day's grind I must needs play a little. But never fear, Aïssé, that I shall not come if thou does need me. If he be worse, send again and I shall be here."

But the end came unexpectedly with the dying of the year. It was in that deathly cold hour just preceding the winter dawn, when the tide of all things is at its turn, before the life-breath comes, the herald of the sun to revivify the world.

All the day previously Charles de Ferriol had refused to remain in bed, nor when night drew in would he quit his couch in the *salon*. On this account those about him did not think him so very ill, and the doctor, who all these years had attended him—the same broad, squat, iron-grey medico, considerably broader and quite white now, but with the old, shrewd, kindly face—had paid his evening visit and departed, bidding them humour the invalid in all his ways, but giving them no warning of what happened.

Thus, expecting no immediate change, Aïssé had gone to her own room as usual, and Bénédict, having made his master comfortable on the sofa, where he insisted upon remaining, with many pillows and a huge fur rug, and having built a big fire in the fireplace, settled himself in his chair and permitted himself to doze.

The doze emerged into a deep slumber, and when Bénédict awoke the fire had died to a heap of smouldering ashes. He was awakened by his master's labouring respiration, and perceived that the last moments had come.

He roused Aïssé instantly, and the girl, who was not

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

undressed, but being tired had also overslept herself, came at once. The Ambassador was almost speechless. He lay, as was his wont, with his head raised on several pillows, and his breath came in gasps. Aïssé understood by the feeble sign he made to her that he wished the windows open and the curtains drawn aside. She set wide one or two of the squares, through which the frosty air rushed in and seemed to revive the dying man. He smiled faintly as she drew back the heavy curtains on either side, so that through the frosted glass they could see the dawn beginning to break in faint streaks above a bank of heavy clouds. The moon was setting—a pallid, wintry moon, dropping slowly down into the bed of blackness; but above, in the arch of sky, there shone a dim grey glow.

Messengers were despatched at once for the doctor and to the Hôtel de Ferriol, apprising the family of the Ambassador's state. Aïssé's first thought was to send for a priest, whose house was but a few doors distant, and he proved to be the only person summoned who did not arrive too late. So far the Ambassador had refused all sacerdotal ministrations, and now when the man of God arrived he tried to raise his nerveless hand to motion this unwelcome intruder away. The priest hesitated, but by a perceptible movement of the head, de Ferriol made his distaste plain. He succeeded in his final desire, for the cleric—an uncultured specimen of the people, without much self-assurance—stepped awkwardly back. When he was out of the line of vision the dying man lifted his cavernous eyes to the dark bank of clouds over which shone that faint glow that heralded the dawn of another day. He was muttering feebly, and Aïssé, shocked and troubled at the way he had rebuffed the priest, bent to catch the broken words. To her astonishment she found that he was faintly repeating in a tone of conviction that incomparable call of the Muezzin to prayer:

The Muezzin's Call

" Allah is great! There is no God but Allah! "

Almost immediately afterwards the sunken eyelids dropped. A tremor passed over the ashen face. Then face and form alike were still. Aissé sank sobbing on her knees by the couch, and the priest came forward and began hastily and nervously to recite Holy Church's prayers for the dead.

CHAPTER V

THE VOICE OF SPRING

THE Ambassador's funeral was over—a very quiet one, which he had himself wished it to be. When his will was read, Madame de Ferriol felt deeply incensed at the terms of it. She wrote a furious letter to Aïssé, reproaching her with having influenced her guardian for her own interests, but, at the same time, bidding her come and take up her abode at the Hôtel de Ferriol. The girl was to have an annuity of four thousand francs. Besides this was the handsome sum represented by that document in the sealed envelope which Aïssé had now opened, and which she kept in her possession. This was to be her marriage portion, if she should marry, or, in certain eventualities, a provision for her later life. But she could not anticipate the capital. Her annuity was intended merely as a liberal dress-allowance and for the supply of her small personal needs. At the present juncture there was nothing for the girl to do but betake herself to the hôtel, especially as this had been her Aga's wish; so thither in due course she went.

Madame de Ferriol would at first scarcely speak to Aïssé, except to intimate crossly that she had been compelled to sell a good deal of the handsome furniture in the suite formerly occupied by the Ambassador, and that the necessity she was under of still further retrenchment did not permit her to re-open any of those rooms, therefore Aïssé must content herself with being lodged in the small upper chamber which had been hers in her childhood. The girl made no complaint—she was too proud and too absorbed in her grief to do so.

The Voice of Spring

Moreover, she supposed that they would come to some financial understanding later, and in the meantime she felt indifferent to minor privations.

After a little while Madame de Ferriol opened the subject. It was her idea that Aïssé should yield up her yearly income and allow herself to be lodged, fed and clothed by her protectress as in her youth. When Aïssé refused the suggested arrangement as unbefitting a woman accustomed to independence, Madame de Ferriol broke out in a storm of reproaches and accusations, which, unjust and exaggerated in the main, had yet the grain of truth which made them sting the sharper.

Aïssé was again compared to the serpent which bit the hand that fed it. According to Madame, Aïssé was responsible for all the ill that had befallen the house. Had M. de Ferriol never brought his baby-slave to the Hôtel de Ferriol things would have developed very differently. Aïssé alone, declared Madame, had brought about the first terrible attack of illness in Paris which ended in the paralysis of the Ambassador. Aïssé had alienated the old man from his relatives and had used her ascendancy to their injury. It was owing to Aïssé that Society now flouted Madame in her poverty and that her sons, whom she adored, had deserted the paternal roof and taken chambers apart because their mother could no longer afford to make their home gay and attractive. To Aïssé's ingratitude, Aïssé's machinations, Madame attributed all her chagrins.

When Aïssé offered to leave the hôtel the attack recommenced. Madame quoted the Ambassador's wish and her promise to him that she would always give Aïssé her protection. But it was only reasonable, she averred, that Aïssé should contribute what she could to the household. Little enough could that be, since Aïssé had schemed with the Ambassador to tie up the fortune she had persuaded him to leave her, and which, but for

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé.

the existence of that iniquitous document, would now be at Madame de Ferriol's disposal. Useless was it for Aïssé to protest indignantly her ignorance of the Ambassador's intentions. The stream of gall flowed on. Finally Madame harked back to that long-ago interview after the dismissal of the Regent. Had Aïssé forgotten her solemn assurance given then, that were it ever in her power she would requite Madame de Ferriol for the maternal care lavished upon her in her childhood.

"I have not forgotten, Madame," said Aïssé, simply. "I had hoped that in coming back to you I might have requited with a daughter's care and affection the kindness you bestowed upon me when I was a child. I am ready to do my best in that way, Madame, but it seems that money, not filial devotion, is what you require. Therefore I see that there is only one way in which I can meet your wishes."

"What do you mean?" asked Madame de Ferriol, alarmed as to the project in the girl's mind.

"This, Madame." Aïssé opened a reticule she wore and drew forth a folded paper. "It seems that I cannot now touch the principal of that sum which M. l'Ambassadeur left for my future provision, but I can destroy the document which assures it to me. Then the money will legally become your property as M. de Ferriol's residuary legatee."

This was true. The Ambassador had considered it wise to secure from his brother's creditors, in this manner, such of his belongings as his sister-in-law inherited. Madame de Ferriol stood dumfounded barely realising that the girl could make so great a sacrifice on her behalf. But Aïssé advanced, with the document in her hand, to the fire, which was burning in the *salon*, and kneeling in front of it was going to cast her little fortune upon the flames. Madame de Ferriol sprang up excitedly and held out her hands for the paper.

The Voice of Spring

"What—what are you doing?" she cried. "Show me that paper."

She was suspicious. A woman who had led a double life and was familiarised with the methods of that close-fisted intriguer, d'Uxelles, was ready to imagine that Aïssé might be deceiving her with a duplicate of the original.

Aïssé turned and held up the deed of gift without letting it out of her hands. She unfolded it so that Madame de Ferriol could read every word, to the well-known signature of her brother-in-law and that of Benoît, the witness to it.

"Are you satisfied that this is genuine?"

"I am satisfied," returned Madame, "that this is the bond which has deprived me and my children of our rights."

"You will be better satisfied then," said Aïssé, "when it no longer exists."

Stung to the quick, she held the paper out close over the burning logs till the flames crept up the sheet and touched her bare wrist.

With a start she dropped the paper, as one might drop a serpent, right into the bed of the fire. The two women watched it till there remained nothing but a shrivelled sheet of tinder, on which there could still be faintly traced a portion of the Ambassador's signature. Then that disappeared; a red hole formed itself in the black tinder; it seemed to Aïssé like the reproachful eye of her dead guardian; soon that too vanished and only a grey shred floated up the wide chimney.

Aïssé shuddered. She got up from her knees, and taking out a kerchief bound it round her wrist, which was red and smarting.

Madame de Ferriol was moved to sudden sympathy.

"Aïssé, have you hurt yourself?"

Aïssé looked the older woman straight in the face as she finished binding the handkerchief.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

"Yes," said she, quietly. "It hurts me to destroy my Aga's last gift to me. But the thing is done now, and since my debt is paid what matter the sting that remains?"

She went towards the door, holding her scorched wrist. Madame de Ferriol, hysterically grateful, unbalanced, remorseful, followed, trying to embrace her.

"Aïssé! how can I thank thee? Now I see that thou art truly my child—my daughter—and as such I will treat thee. Aïssé, forget my harsh words. I did not mean to be unkind. But I have suffered much—thou canst not understand how I have suffered. Henceforth thou wilt be my consolation and I will do everything for thee that a mother can do. See then, thou shalt move into the rooms which my brother inhabited. Choose which one thou wilt and I will contrive for its furnishings."

So matters were decided, though in truth, as Aïssé was to discover, the surrender of her fortune made small amendment in Madame's parsimony, which as well as her avarice had grown into a disease. Or perhaps the debts were greater than anyone imagined. It went to Aïssé's heart to see the Ambassador's suite denuded of its choice cabinets and settees, and the beautiful Turkish carpets and hangings he had brought over. The rooms were almost bare, and Aïssé had some difficulty in selecting the one least despoiled. That in which she had formerly slept lacked the dainty inlaid bed, the mirrors and ormolu-mounted chests and cabinets which Madame de Ferriol had found of considerable market value. Moreover, damage had been done to the walls in removing the tapestry, and it would have taken a good deal of money to make the chamber habitable. Aïssé ended by installing herself in the late Ambassador's bedroom—the associations of the *salon* were too painful to her. But in the other room there was an alcove with a great carved bed, whose

The Voice of Spring

faded red hangings had not been taken down, and no dealer had wanted the high dark wood presses, the old-fashioned settee and the quaint chairs and stools of a former generation. The fireplace was large and open, with a high-placed iron basket in it for grate, and high shelves above, on which Aïssé put her favourite bits of china, of which she had quite a fine collection. On the walls were some old prints in queer curved frames. The bed was a room in itself, enclosed within four fluted wooden pillars, which bowed outwards at the knees and ended in claw feet clasping a bulbous apple, while at the top they formed into grotesque heads—semi-human, and with a leering, satiric expression. These and similar masks supporting the canopy inside were hideous, Aïssé thought, and she did not like looking at them. But, as she remembered of old, there was a carving on the wooden panel at the head of the bed of quite a different style from the rest, and probably a later addition. That was the head of an angel, carved in relief against two crossed wings, the pinions folding over at the tips and waving away in indiscriminate lines to the edge of the panel. This face gave Aïssé a sense of support and peace. It was so strong and calm and sweet, with its full down-bent eyes and tender lips. She liked to lie beneath it, and, on account of the face, she never wished to exchange her great bed for one of lighter make, even when she indulged in more modern furniture. By-and-by, she had the bed re-draped in such a manner as to hide the disagreeable monsters. Both the bed and its alcove were then closed in with hangings of satin-like tapestry in a green-and-white stripe—Aïssé had a fancy for green as a background—and she had the quaint high-backed settee and the chairs and stools upholstered in the same green-and-white material. It was the fashion for people to make New Year presents of brocade and embossed velvet—a favourite gift of Madame de Parabère's. These Aïssé

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

made up into cushions, which she scattered about. One of her little habits—doubtless due to her Oriental origin—was to put a cushion on the floor and sit upon it in preference to a chair. Hers were deft fingers, and they did much embroidery, which she fashioned into coverings for chairs, footstools and so forth. She had an embroidery-frame in the window, and often would sit and work at it while she talked to her visitors. *Causerie* of the *ruelle* made still a feature of French high life, and women at all times received in their bedrooms.

Aïssé was a woman who enjoyed gossips with her friends—as her letters show plainly enough. She liked letter-writing, too. It was perhaps her most intellectual enjoyment, and she had a voluminous writing portfolio of chased leather, with handles, which enabled her to carry it from table to couch and to write on her knee. There was a spindle-legged table with carved Eastern ivory toys—all her own personal knick-knacks—and a few bowls of flowers about the room—country ones for choice. Whenever she went for a walk out of the city, especially in spring, Aïssé would bring back primroses, daffodils and violets, which she arranged in pottery vessels. She span, too. In one of her accounts of a visit to Ablon she tells how she spent her time spinning “to make herself chemises.”

An essentially feminine woman this—of the sweet-natured, conventional type, whose taste was to the mode of the day, nothing daring or particularly original about her. A woman whose only genius was for loving one man with absolute fidelity and for smoothing with delicate housewifely tact domestic rufflements and social *contretemps*. Somewhat of an anachronism in her own period, she would have shown to better advantage, perhaps, as the mistress of a comfortable country house in the early Victorian era.

Aïssé was very proud of her room after she had had it re-decorated “at the cost of a hundred pistoles,”

The Voice of Spring

as she tells Madame Calandrini in one of her published letters.

There is a charming womanliness in this description.

"*You would not recognise it. It is so pretty.*" She is delighted with a bowl Madame Calandrini had given her. "*La Mésangère*"—he was the King's *maitre d'hôtel* and a redoubted guest at Ablon—"who came the other day, said to me, 'You have very fine china, among other pieces this bowl.' My furniture," she goes on, "*is of the simplest but made by the best workmen. People come to see it out of curiosity.*" And she adds, throwing a little light on the manners of the day, "*I have a great mind, following your example, to scold those who spit there.*"

Aissé's maid, Sophie, received her orders for the change of rooms with satisfaction. She had angrily resented Madame de Ferriol's treatment of her young mistress, whose service she had been in since *la belle Circassienne's* early girlhood.

She was a gentle creature, Sophie, not many years older than her lady, partly Swiss in nationality, soft-complexioned, brown-haired, and of dove-like mien. Her pride in Aissé's beauty was great, and she was quick and clever in showing it to the best advantage. Her devotion was at once maternal and child-like. Aissé, in her later letters to Madame Calandrini, tells of Sophie's unselfish loyalty in her refusal, when Aissé was in financial straits, to take the wages due to her. In those days the maid was well aware of her mistress's secret. She became her stay and comfort at the crisis of Aissé's tragic passion.

Spring had arrived; and spring in Paris is very beautiful.

Aissé was alone at the Hôtel de Ferriol. Madame had gone to Ablon for a few days, and her own *femme-*

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

de-chambre being indisposed, Aïssé had sent Sophie with her.

She was glad to be alone, thankful for a short respite from the daily irritations of companionship with Madame de Ferriol. Her soul needed rest and grace. Some vague thought had occurred to her of making a retreat at the convent of the Nouvelles Catholiques in the Rue Ste Anne.

Now, as she awoke in her great bed on that spring dawn, the sound of the convent bells calling the nuns to their first morning prayers seemed to the girl to summon her to prayer also.

Aïssé arose and drew her curtains apart. The sweet freshness of the April dawn smote her senses and gave her a feeling of dreamy exhilaration mingled with other-world yearning. Her room looked over the garden and beyond, over the roofed tops and spires of the city, with patches of green visible between—all etherealised in the dim morning light. No smoke curled from the chimneys; Paris was sleeping still, but Nature had awakened. A radiance of blue and silver and faint pink overspread the sky.

The birds were chirping loudly and trilling love-songs to their mates. From the garden rose up the scent of spring bulbs, almost intoxicating in the morning clearness. The lilac was breaking its bud-sheaths. The wistaria, stouter stemmed than of yore, still flung its cascade of odorous purple clusters over the fateful ledge. As she looked to her right Aïssé could see the narrow balcony from which, in her wild flight, she had gained the parapet, clinging to the old wistaria. But she had long ago forgiven that hour of madness. She understood better now how much of true chivalry had underlain the untamed passion for her in the dead man's breast.

Some impulse born of spring made Aïssé put on a robe the colour of wood violets, and over that a hooded

The Voice of Spring

cloak the hue of Mother Earth's brown bosom. She drew the hood over her head, and taking her rosary went down the slippery oak staircase and out into the quiet street. She walked on further than the convent, past old-world houses and gardens within grey walls, over which the exquisite young green showed against a sky still silvery-rose above the flame-colour that proclaims the mounting sun. That dreamy sense of exhilaration, of awed expectancy peculiar to the spring, possessed Aissé. As she walked, her mind turned yearningly to the absent hero of whom she had heard nothing for a long time, save the rumour that he was being employed upon some important mission by the new Grand-master, de Vilhena.

But the convent bell called her back, and she retraced her steps and went into the dim little chapel, standing aside for a troop of black-robed, white-coifed nuns to pass her in the aisle. It was like coming into another world, out of new-born sunshine into this consecrated atmosphere heavy with the scent of incense and of religious tradition.

There was the usual congregation which Aissé knew so well; the nuns and their boarders, and the ladies in retreat; some old men and pious old women, some labourers looking in on their way to work—half a dozen or so of heterogeneous worshippers. She took no notice of any of them, but made her way to the dim side corner, where was the little Lady Altar, and kneeled against the rail before it.

Aissé did not rise at the opening of the service, but remained with bowed head praying. All the vague desires of womanhood were stirring within her, making tumult in her soul. She prayed for peace, and grace, for spiritual aid in her many difficulties; and lastly she prayed with intense fervour for the man she loved, pleading that, if it were Heaven's will, she might see him again.

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

Even as she prayed Heaven granted her prayer.

A man entered the chapel; an aristocrat evidently, belonging to a religious order, one who had likewise risen early to make his devotions. For the spring had called him too, and he had come forth with the dawn and had been lingering about the place where his beloved dwelt. From a little distance he had seen Aïssé enter the chapel and had followed her, searching the shadows for her form. When he had found her he stepped softly to where she kneeled, and, unobserved, took his place beside her.

Absorbed in her devotions she was quite unconscious of his presence.

"*Ave Maria! gratia plena,*" chanted the nuns, and the children's young voices, like a chorus of birds, took up the canticle.

A slight movement on the man's part at length attracted Aïssé's attention. She stirred and turned her eyes towards him. A wild, delicious tremor went through her whole body. There, so close that her cloak brushed the cross-handle of his short sword, kneeled the Knight of Malta.

His gaze was upon her face, not upon the Virgin, whom in the salutation he was adoring. His eyes were misty with the joy of seeing the woman whom he desired. His flaxen curls framed his head like a halo, and were tied at the back with a broad brown ribbon: the badge of his Order was on his breast. Vowed soldier of the Cross, monk militant, but yet a man with passions like unto those of other men, the love of her which he could no longer hide declared itself in his eyes and claimed her mutely for his own.

It was a rushing together of souls which no force, human or divine, could have kept asunder; a union, doubtless perfected in the spirit, that must inevitably have found its piteous expression in the flesh. To Aïssé

The Voice of Spring

it was the realisation of her Knight of the Grail as mortal wooer; a revelation such as came to Elsa and to Psyche, of god-lover become human for her sake. Alack! like Elsa and like Psyche, Aïssé had to learn that the more heaven-born the love, the greater its travail when bound by the limitations of earth.

"*Salve Regina, mater misericordiae,*" sang the nuns.

"*Ora pro nobis sancta Dei Genetrix,*" went the response.

D'Aydie was holding her by the hand. Now he rose and drew Aïssé to her feet, not waiting for the benediction. He led her down the shadowy side aisle and out into the sunlit porch. She went with him like a woman in a dream, as she would have followed him to death had he bidden her.

The porch was empty. Only a few late worshippers had just passed through, eyeing them curiously. These entered the chapel, leaving Aïssé and the Chevalier as much alone as though the world held no other.

"Oh! my beloved! at last! at last!" cried d'Aydie, and folded his arms around her.

In this dream-idyll there was no need for explanations. Eyes answered eyes and lips clung to lips. From within the chapel walls came the solemn melody of the nun's chant—the dedication of soul and body to spiritual ends; but here flesh and spirit together leaped towards the goal of union with the beloved on earth. Let those who would recite a creed of separateness. At this moment Aïssé and Blaize d'Aydie recognised only the root of all law and all social systems—human or divine—"Twain shall be one flesh." Church and State might as well cease to sound warnings in their ears, for from the wider world of Nature there rang imperiously the pantheistic call of its many voices. The exultant pæan of the birds, the distant murmur of wakening

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

humanity in the far-away stir of the city, the sunlight gilding roofs and pinnacles, and turning the grey-green chestnut buds of the trees opposite into little cones of silver, the subtle blend of spring perfumes rousing all the joy of life and stimulating the senses, even the twining shoots of young green thrusting themselves through the interstices of the porch—all these were forces arrayed on the side of Nature.

"How long you have been away," Aïssé sighed in her supreme content as he held her close.

"It had to be, my sweet. But come now, to-day at least is ours."

He led her out down the old stone steps worn by the tread of many feet, out into the world, that wondrous, transfigured world, where the vision beautiful was beckoning both into their kingdom of enchantment.

D'Aydie hailed a passing hackney coach and they were driven along by the bank of the river where barges floated, and boat-loads of country produce came up on the tide, and where, in the rippling current mid-stream, the sun threw a million beams, while in the glassy waters at the sides there were distorted pictures of green banks and brown wharves and spreading foliage.

They dismissed the coach, crossing in a ferry-boat that plied to and fro, and presently were on the borders of a forest following a road shadowed by trees. By-and-by, a country cart laden with sacks of meal overtook them. It was driven by a youth in a blue blouse, who was ready enough to give the two a lift on their way. So, laughing like children, they swung themselves aloft, where Aïssé sat on a sack of flour, and d'Aydie on the edge of the cart against her side.

Thus they journeyed until at two cross-roads cutting the forest there stood a little inn with bricked yard and lattice windows and thatched roof, and a fresh

The Voice of Spring

branch—sign of good wine—placed over its doorway.

Mine host came out to greet them. A genial fellow in coarse white apron folded round his middle, high yellow country-made boots, his head bare, his sleeves tucked to the elbow. After him his wife, in blue linen gown, spotless kerchief, and close-fitting cap with starched frills framing a smiling, comely face. Mine host and his wife took the other pair for runaway lovers, being young enough to remember their own wooing. They gave the wayfarers their heartiest welcome, and set before them their best.

It was a pleasant meal in the little sanded parlour; a goldfinch twittering in its cage, early jasmine twining the window lattices, a pot of sweet gilly-flowers on the sill. Mine hostess carried in the *friture* of little fish fresh from the Seine, while the host fetched his best white wine. Then an omelet and country cheese and coffee—could gods desire better fare?

And afterwards! Ah! the thrilling sweetness of that afterwards! They wandered away—away—down glades that were sheets of blue-bells and wood anemones, by banks of wild hyacinth and primroses and aromatic thyme; deep, deep into the forest's heart, till the verdant glades converged on a secret place of bliss where the tall trees roofed them in. Here Mother Earth spread her couch of brown and purple and green for their nesting, while the mating birds above them carolled a nuptial song in tune with the ecstasy of the hour.

CHAPTER VI

FRUITION

THE lily-lady might no longer wear her crown of unstained petals. A red rose must now be Mademoiselle Aïssé's symbol. Her friends began to talk among themselves and to smile meaningly when she and the Chevalier met at the houses of joint acquaintances and were drawn naturally towards each other, seeming to have no eyes nor ears for anybody else. D'Aydie haunted the places where Aïssé was likely to be, and she, possessed by a new restlessness, felt herself dragged as by magnetic cords to houses where he was a welcome guest.

She regularly frequented the *salons* of Madame du Deffand and of Madame de Parabère, both of whom were friends of d'Aydie and gave him ample opportunities for seeing Aïssé. Madame de Parabère was quick to discover Aïssé's secret. And in truth Aïssé's secret was writ large on her face and in her demeanour. She, once so cold, so reticent, in her maiden dignity, was now no better than any blushing, helpless, passion-tossed woman.

Formerly she had been shy of over-intimacy with the frail de Parabère and had tried to ignore that lady's ever ardent but unstable *amours*. Now, in proud humility, she told herself that the world, if it knew, would have a right to place her on the same level as her friend. The only difference was that Aïssé had given

Fruition

herself to the one, Madame de Parabère to the many. But one must do Madame de Parabère the justice to admit that love had been the actuating force in all cases. Madame de Parabère was always madly in love, however often she might change the object of her affections.

On the other hand, Madame du Deffand's sympathetic attitude towards Aïssé was largely due to intellectual curiosity. Here was the grand passion she herself hoped one day to experience, ready to be studied from its very beginning. Her sympathy took the practical form of diverting Madame de Ferriol's interest, so that Aïssé was allowed more liberty. She persuaded Madame de Ferriol to go out more, even to receive in her own *salon*. Madame was at once jealous and gratified to find that Aïssé attracted the old crowd again; thankful because it brought her sons back home sometimes but bitter at owing their presence to another. Poor Madame de Ferriol! Aïssé pitied her, wounded as she had been in the two strongest emotions of which the elder woman's nature was capable.

But about this time my lord Bolingbroke, coming to and fro between La Source, Ablon and Paris in order to consult with d'Uxelles as to the best method of saving some of his money out of the Law crash, brought about a temporary revival of the intimacy between Madame and the Maréchal. It was well known that Maréchal d'Uxelles had wearied of the *liaison* long since, and that seekers after place had ceased to beg Madame de Ferriol's intercession with the Minister for favours they desired to gain. But the case with the Bolingbrokes was different. They were old friends. The Marquise, as yet an unacknowledged wife—though only until the reversion of the Bill of Attainder—was now in London negotiating with the Duchess of Kendal—King George's German mistress—for the pardon of her lord, but was expected back

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

towards the end of the summer. Hence the Bolingbroke affairs occupied Madame de Ferriol a good deal just then, as my lord's letters to her testify. The result was that Aïssé found herself freer to meet the Chevalier anywhere she chose, and to receive him in her own apartment, which she did frequently.

There was, of course, nothing strange in that ; it was the custom of the day, and Aïssé had received in her own room M. Berthier de Sauvigny, her faithful admirer ; Voltaire, de Nocé, a host of other men. But when this particular man came day after day, and his chair waited at the door of the Hôtel de Ferriol until late at night, or rather until early morning, after the Chevalier had brought Mademoiselle Aïssé home from supping with the Marquise de Parabère or from the opera or Comédie Française, where the pair would have formed part of the company in a friend's box, naturally tongues were set wagging, and rumour had it that the fair Circassian and the Knight of Malta should, were it possible, be man and wife.

It was the virtuous and exclusive Marquise de Lambert, who, in ceasing to invite Mademoiselle Aïssé to her famous Tuesdays, first brought home to the girl that she had lost social caste. For even in the Regency there were one or two great dames who played the part of modern Mrs Grundy. Aïssé writhed under the slight as a conventional woman, who has all her life lived regularly, must needs writhe in spirit when convicted of the first irregularity. Passionately tender, she was yet, as must have been seen, a creature of limitations. In all the primal elements of her being she was drawn to her lover as inevitably as, given a certain propinquity, the lodestone must attract the needle. But all the more sophisticated part of her shrank from a position which offended her acquired sense of morality. There was nothing whatever of the

Fruition

Bohemian in Aissé's temperament. It was agony to her to feel that she had offended against the accepted canons of propriety—lowered herself, perhaps, even in the sight of the man she adored. She held this terror before her eyes, as timid women will, notwithstanding that the Chevalier's respect as well as his adoration never for an instant faltered.

She went through tortures of remorse, more on his account than on her own. When the first dream-like ecstasy was over she had wild fits of reaction, in which she would have sent her lover from her or would have flown from him had she been able. But it was impossible for her to bid him go. He had only to take her in his arms for her to become love's slave once more. It was equally impossible for her to tear herself from Paris and thus avoid the temptation of his companionship. Besides, she was dependent to a great extent upon Madame de Ferriol. How and where could she go?

The weakness which made her helplessly crave assistance to break those dear bonds as duty urged, but which her heart forbade her to sever, turned her at this crisis to Madame de Ferriol. She appears to have had a desperate hope that Madame might rescue her from herself, and—what Aissé thought most of—prevent her from ruining the Chevalier's career. She loved him too well for that.

He had offered to try and obtain the dispensation which would enable him to marry her. But this Aissé absolutely refused to permit. Nothing would induce her to let him make her his wife—supposing, which was doubtful, that he could ever do so—for in so doing the girl felt that she would wreck his life irretrievably. There seemed to be only one course possible—they must part: yet he had declared that he would never give her up. She was the one woman

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

in the world for him. His union with her, however illegitimate according to the laws of society and the rules of the Church, was in his eyes veritably a sacrament. Therein perhaps he had a truer idea of the holiness of love than Aïssé herself, for in all his relations with her till the end he proved himself verily the knight *sans peur et sans reproche*.

Had not the Chevalier loved her so devotedly Aïssé might have found the courage to persist in her determination. As it was, she longed to throw the burden of their separation on another. If Madame de Ferriol would exercise her authority in some way, Aïssé resolved that she would submit, even if it killed her of grief. But Madame de Ferriol was not made of the stuff for heroic measures. Besides, she was plunged once more in peevish gloom, for the Maréchal had cooled off again, though a semblance of friendship remained to the last. My lord Bolingbroke was back at La Source waiting for the result of the Marquise's negotiations. Meanwhile Madame nursed her lap-dogs—the only creatures to whom she was amiable; she scolded her servants, made scenes with the Président on the eternal money question, pared down her housekeeping expenses, and reproached her sons bitterly because they stayed away. The rest of her ill-humours she vented on Aïssé, who, however, she sometimes said, in moments of penitence, was the only person in the world who showed any sympathy with her sorrows and increasing ill-health.

Aïssé bore her protectress's tempers with a patience that in her self-absorption had become almost mechanical. She had always the feeling of living in a dream that alternated between feverish rapture and brooding melancholy. Her mind was full of fear which as yet she could not put into words. She had time now for thought. The Chevalier had reluctantly gone on one

Fruition

of his regular visits to his family in Périgord. It was the opportunity to appeal to Madame.

But Madame, immersed in her chagrins and petty economies, had no attention to spare for Aïssé's manifest depression. She neither courted nor expected the girl's confidence. There was no secrecy observed in regard to d'Aydie's visits, and though Madame was perhaps unaware of their frequency she was not likely to object to that, for she considered it a credit to the hôtel that a man of the Chevalier's standing should be remarked as a constant guest. Nevertheless, Aïssé, in desperation seized a chance of broaching the subject when one day the two women were alone together.

Madame de Ferriol was knitting, and Aïssé at her embroidery-frame, weaving her love and her hopes, and the vague, terrible apprehension which beset her, into the silk stitches she was making. Madame de Ferriol's fingers were getting clumsy with gout; she often dropped her needles and got her work into hopeless confusion, which Aïssé was invariably called to put right. This happened now. The girl left her embroidery-frame, and throwing a cushion on the ground beside Madame de Ferriol's chair, began to unravel the knots and pick up the dropped loops. But she, whose fingers were usually so deft, showed herself clumsy to-day. Madame de Ferriol watched her futile endeavours to put the knitting right, and at last exclaimed crossly, "What ails you, Aïssé, to be so stupid?"

Aïssé let the knitting fall, and kneeling on the cushion looked at Madame de Ferriol with anxious eyes.

"I am afraid that I am stupid, but it is difficult for me just now to collect my thoughts. *Maman*"—she called Madame de Ferriol by the now seldom-used baby-name—" *maman*, I am in trouble; I want you to help me."

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

"You want *me* to help you!" said Madame, with a short laugh. "There's no use in your coming to me for help, for you are a much better embroiderer than I am. Well you may be," she went on in her acid, complaining way, "always a spoiled child, with nothing to do but amuse yourself. *You* talk of trouble! If you had suffered the misfortunes that have overwhelmed *me*! I am a wretched woman with a broken heart. But who understands or cares!"

"Perhaps, *maman*, it is because I *do* understand a little that I am asking you, who have known trouble, to help me now."

Something in the girl's tone alarmed the elder woman. "What is it?" she asked. "Have you been doing anything foolish, Aïssé?"

"Perhaps so. In this case I cannot judge what is wisdom or folly. I want you to judge—to act for me."

"Well, well, tell me what it is. My knitting, please; I'll pick up the stitches while I listen to you."

"Oh, *maman*, do not talk of dropped stitches. This is something more serious; it is my life."

Aïssé picked up the fallen knitting and laid it aside.

"*Maman*, if I have been foolish help me to be wise."

"I have not been wise myself," said Madame de Ferriol, with bitter frankness; "you know that, Aïssé."

"*I* think," said Aïssé, gently, "that no woman can be wholly wise where her own heart is concerned. It is then that she needs the help of a true friend."

"I have always tried to be a true friend to you, though hitherto you have flouted my advice. But tell me what you wish. I will give you all the help I can, so long as it isn't in money. I hope you haven't been getting into debt at cards, Aïssé?"

Fruition

"No, no. It is from something worse than debt that I ask you to save me."

"Worse than debt! Impossible. How then? From what do you wish me to save you?"

"From the dearest joy—the most beloved pain. Oh, I am afraid, *maman*—I am afraid."

"*Mon Dieu!* I suppose that you are in love at last. But why be afraid? And of whom?"

"Of M. le Chevalier d'Aydie," said Aïssé, very low.

"D'Aydie, whom every woman in Paris is dying to have for a lover! And you fear him? Truly you are a fool, Aïssé. Is he not everything that you could desire?"

"All—more than all," said Aïssé, with rapt eyes.

"Then why this fuss? A woman must have a lover some time; you have been a long while about it, that is all. It is a very good thing that you are in love at last. Claudine will be enchanted to hear this. Now you will not give yourself such romantic airs of virtue, which might have been well enough in a girl straight from a convent, but you have long ceased to be a chicken. It is a pity," pursued Madame de Ferriol; becoming at last interested in a subject other than her own woes, "a great pity that you are not married. When one is married these things arrange themselves more easily. I fear, however, that you have lost your chances, for, as I said, you are an egg that is not quite new-laid. And though Berthier displays a fidelity incredible, I doubt if he would play the rôle of *mari complaisant*. *Dame!* What a different affair to that of Monseigneur the Regent. Ah! now you see your folly. Of course there is a certain distinction in being chosen by such a man as the Chevalier, but he cannot marry you—he cannot make you Madame la Marquise d'Escarlion de la Roque. *Quelle chance!* Lost—lost

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

through your mad obstinacy!" Madame de Ferriol lifted her hands and dramatically shook her head.

"Oh, Madame, do not speak so. Can you not understand?"

"But yes, naturally I understand. There's no use in crying over spilt milk, you would say. Well, I will speak no more about Monseigneur, though it was the opportunity of your life, Aïssé. Still, I am your friend. I will put no obstacles in the way of your little affair."

"Oh, Madame, can you not understand?" repeated Aïssé, wildly. "It is *that* which I desire. That you—my guardian—my mother by adoption, will make it impossible for this thing to be."

"But why? Why should it not be? *Ma foi!*" interrupted Madame de Ferriol, "what do you want me to do?"

"Forbid the Chevalier your house. Assert your authority over me. Bind me by any pledge. I swear that I will faithfully keep it. Take me away, *maman*—take me to Pont de Veyle. He will not follow us there, or if he does—refuse to receive him."

"You are out of your senses, Aïssé! How can I go to Pont de Veyle? Do you not know that I am expecting Madame de Villette from England, and that I have promised my lord Bolingbroke to arrange a conference between her and the Maréchal, who will use his influence with the English Ambassador in regard to the pardon of my lord? How can you imagine that I can go to Pont de Veyle with such important matters on hand? The Maréchal returns to Paris to-night. The Marquise may come at any hour. I have a letter from my lord saying she was to cross a day or two back if the weather held fair. She will join my lord at La Source and they will both probably come back to Paris. Suppose they did not find me here? *Mon Dieu!* Aïssé, being in love has made you forget all affairs but your own."



Fruition

Yes, Aissé had forgotten; her mind was too full of her pressing anxieties. But these were not insuperable difficulties. Madame de Ferriol made the most of her own importance in the matter. She was not wanted in the least. Madame de Villette and my lord Bolingbroke could arrange their affairs perfectly well with the Maréchal without her assistance. But Aissé could not well say that; she could only implore.

"Oh, Madame, for the love of heaven show some regard for my welfare. You at whose knees I was brought up, believing you to be a model of womanly virtues—show me what a true woman can be to another woman in sore distress."

"I do not comprehend you," said Madame de Ferriol, drawing a little shawl she wore closer round her shoulders. "I have never failed in my duty towards you, Aissé, however much you may have been to blame in your conduct towards me. I have always had your interests at heart."

"Prove it then, Madame. Be my good angel now. Be strong for me. Alas! I have no strength of myself, for I love him! And he—he too is weak, because he loves me."

"*Eh bien!* You love; he loves. *Vraiment, les deux sont joliment bien ensemble.*" Madame de Ferriol laughed coarsely and Aissé shivered. "What more would you have?"

"Madame, I would have a strong hand stretched forth to save us from what must be his downfall and mine. How can I bear that he who is so noble should break his vows—for me? Can I rest easy and remain his temptress—his undoing? No, a thousand times no!"

"But *le bon Dieu* does not expect too much from frail mortals. If one must spend a year or two longer in Purgatory it will be in good company at least, among

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

all one's friends. You are silly, Aïssé. Because one has the good fortune to be loved by a Knight of St John there is no need for going back to the sentiments of the Troubadours."

"Nor any need, Madame, to scoff at vows that should be sacred," cried Aïssé, stung to retort. "I should have remembered that the obligations of religion have never weighed heavily upon the members of your family."

The girl sprang to her feet. Madame de Ferriol too half rose, leaning on the arms of her chair.

"Insolent! Do you dare to impugn the character of my brother the Archbishop?"

Aïssé's thrust had chanced on a tender spot. Just at this time the Abbé de Tencin and his sister the ex-nun had rather overdone their ecclesiastical intrigues. An archbishop publicly accused of simony on the evidence of his own handwriting, and a canoness of the Church convicted of unsealing and passing on the contents of State communications between Rome and Paris, cannot be considered as precisely a credit to their relations. Madame de Tencin and her brother had deemed it advisable for the present to remain in their native province. So for some time the girl had not seen either of them. For this reason partly, and partly because she had no mind for outside matters, Aïssé had forgotten the disagreeable episode. She was too generous, had she remembered it, to make so pointed an allusion. Now she was sorry, and at once tendered the *amende*—womanlike—towards M. le Abbé at least.

"No, Madame. I spoke hastily and I ask you to pardon the expression so far as Monseigneur the Archbishop is concerned."

Madame de Ferriol overlooked the indirect allusion to her sister and accepted the apology. She sank back into her chair.

Fruition

"I forgive you, Aïssé. I know well that when a woman loves she cannot be held accountable for unconsidered words. You must not think I meant to be harsh with you. I have suffered too much myself. Why, I was younger than you are now when Charles de Ferriol brought you here—a babe. I was tossed and torn even then between the claims of duty and of love. I have made sacrifices—*Mon Dieu!* to what avail? I tell you that love must conquer and reign for as long as he chooses to retain his sovereignty. In vain for a hapless woman to struggle! She is vanquished by that which is stronger than herself."

The girl stood listening eagerly, anger in her gradually giving place to pity, then a vague contempt. Madame de Ferriol was again lost in her reminiscences. She went on, "Nothing could exceed my devotion to *him—mon Dieu!* what a lover! In his youth there was no one who came near him. Your Chevalier is handsome but he does not compare with d'Uxelles. Yet my adoration of d'Uxelles has never interfered with my duty to my sons—I have been a good mother, Aïssé, I have always considered the welfare of my children, and how have they rewarded me? How have I suffered in the conflict of emotions—of claims? And to what end? All returns to the same! Aïssé, be wise in time and enjoy all you can. When a woman's charm fades and the consideration of her world fails—mother or mistress—all returns to the same. There remains but the memory of the past and the pale ghost of friendship as a solace for the future."

Aïssé said nothing. What could she say? A gulf seemed to gape between her and the other woman who had loved and who loved truly still. Yet it appeared sacrilege to compare the Chevalier—her Knight of the Grail—to such a man as d'Uxelles. At last she said:

"Madame, the cases are different. In your case there was no vow which it would be sin to break."

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

Madame de Ferriol looked at the girl, recalled with difficulty to her appeal. Then she laughed, the hard laugh of one who has eaten the fruit and found it ashes. She was again the disappointed, cynical woman of middle age, without sufficient intellect to surmount the loss of her illusions.

"But you are absurd, Aïssé. Who in our world supposes that a Knight of Malta preserves his vow of chastity? The vow of celibacy is enough. And as long as he preserves *that* I am told that he is kept sufficiently well provided with means to enjoy such liberty as is allowed him. It is a rich order. I know that the Chevalier d'Aydie has little or no private fortune, but I presume that nevertheless he is able and prepared to pay for his pleasures."

Aïssé uttered a passionate exclamation. She drew back, crimsoning deeply.

"Madame! you have said enough. Be assured that I shall trouble you no more."

In her own chamber, after a fit of hysterical sobbing, Aïssé paced the room in a state of feverish excitement her hands pressed against her bosom to quell the sick apprehension, mingled with a curious exhilaration, that had come over her. She was almost glad that her effort had failed. For a time at anyrate the horror of parting with the man she loved had been averted. When he came back to Paris he would still find her there, and in the rapture of reunion conscience would be drugged afresh.

She tried, nevertheless, to think if there were no other possible plan of salvation. But there was no one else in whom she cared to confide—except it might be Claire de Marcilly de Villette. *She* would understand. From her Aïssé was certain of the tenderest sympathy. But instinctively the girl knew that however much they might differ in manner and spirit, yet in substance

Fruition

Madame de Villette's counsels would be the same as those of Madame de Ferriol. Claire de Villette would not urge renunciation; for she herself had not renounced. She would bid Aïssé seize her joy with both hands and hold it securely.

It seemed to Aïssé that there was no use in struggling. She who had strung herself up to the point of breaking her chains at Madame de Ferriol's command, now revelled in them anew as if they were garlands of roses.

Her first impulse was to open her whole heart to the Chevalier. She had not written to him for two days—had not dared to do so; she had hardly dared to read his last letter.

She took it now from her bosom and kissed the words his hand had traced—her heart devouring the tender regrets and longings for her presence that his pen poured forth. And yet the letter contained much that hurt her sensitive soul. All through it breathed his pride in his family, his affection and admiration for his mother—that great lady of the *vieille roche*. What would she, with her traditions and prejudices, think of a marriage between her son and the Circassian slave? No! *that* must never be.

Aïssé had covered many sheets with writing, oblivious to a certain bustle in the hotel—the clang of a bell, the opening of the street door, the tread of feet on the staircase. She was therefore unprepared for a knocking at her own door and the sudden entrance of Sophie, announcing that Madame la Marquise de Villette had arrived and was demanding to see Mademoiselle.

Aïssé rose hastily. The frail form of Lady Bolingbroke, in her travelling cloak, her sweet face radiant, stood on the threshold. She came in, her arms outstretched, crying:

“Make me thy felicitations, *ma bien aimée*. All is

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

well! The pardon for my lord Bolingbroke is now a certainty. But for the delay in this affair I would have been with thee some days back, but I could say nothing until I had apprised my lord by courier from Calais of certain papers that had need of his approval before our English friends, who accompanied me across, could take them back to the Duchess of Kendal. Oh, my dear, to owe this grace to a creature such as the Schulemberg is a pill our Harré had sore ado to swallow."

She stopped and looked questioningly at Aïssé. Lady Bolingbroke had been immersed in her own joys and anxieties, glorying in the triumph of her husband, and with only the desire in her mind to acquaint the young friend, whom she knew would rejoice with her, of the successful result of her mission to the English court. Now she marvelled at what had befallen Aïssé to change her so greatly since their last interchange of confidences before the Marquise's departure in the spring.

"Why dost thou not speak or embrace me?" she cried. "Art thou ill, Aïssé? My child, what ails thee?"

For Aïssé seemed barely conscious of her friend's presence.

She was standing where she had risen, her writing-case fallen, the sheets of her letter to her lover scattered, one hand clutching the high carved end of the settee, her face deadly white, and in her eyes a wild expression of rapture blended with terror.

She made a step forward, but tottered. An overwhelming feeling of faintness came upon her and with it a fluttering sensation such as she had never known. In a flash of instinctive feminine comprehension she realised the first stirring of the new life to be born of her.

"*Oh! Sainte Vierge, Mère de Jesus! ayez pitié pour moi!*" murmured the unhappy girl.

Fruition

Lady Bolingbroke, clasping her swaying form, caught the words, and to her they were a revelation. Reports had reached her, confirmed by my lord, who, being on terms of friendship with the Chevalier and sharing his wife's tender regard for Aissé, had guessed the state of affairs between those two. And now the woman's instinct of this woman who had never been a mother, but who to the core of her thrilled with maternal tenderness, leaped to the truth to which Madame de Ferriol had been utterly blind.

CHAPTER VII

FINGER-PRINTS OF TIME

Every memoir-writer of the period, touching upon the French associations of Lord Bolingbroke and his second wife, tells of the act of kindness performed by them to the fair Circassian in her hour of trial. It is curious how this secret, so carefully guarded at the time by Lady Bolingbroke and her husband, and indeed costing them some self-sacrifice and considerable ingenuity in making a fictitious story appear plausible, should now be blazoned forth to their credit, as though it were the most openly benevolent deed either had ever performed. It is told with so little deviation of detail by the various narrators of the story, that, clearly, it must very soon after Aïssé's death have become public property. There is therefore no question that Lady Bolingbroke—as she was known to be in legal fact, immediately after the reversal of the Bill of Attainder—played the part of rescuing angel to Aïssé, practically saving the girl's reputation in her own world.

For in Parisian Society, even in the worst days of the Regency, though the *gros péché* might be flaunted with impunity, its innocent offspring must at all costs be hidden away. And when the young king, in the early years at least of his reign, set an amazing example of conjugal fidelity, Paris became, for a short while, a very whited sepulchre of morality.

One may take it for granted, from the after evidence of the letters extant, that Madame de Ferriol was not

Finger-Prints of Time

aware of the plan concocted to screen Aïssé when the Marquise obtained her consent to Aïssé's accompanying the Bolingbroke on a supposititious visit to England. There is a gap here in the Bolingbroke correspondence, scantily filled by a letter or two of my lord's from Aix-la-Chapelle and Spa, and some discrepancy in the accounts of the Marquise's movements. One fact, however, appears, that she got together a pretty bonus of some eleven thousand pounds in acknowledgment of the services of the Schulemberg, otherwise the Duchess of Kendal, who, as the saying went, "*se vendit cher*." But whether Lady Bolingbroke went to London or not that autumn and early winter, it is certain that Aïssé did not accompany her friend. The reports tell of how Lady Bolingbroke established her in an obscure lodging in Paris with an English man-servant and the faithful Sophie, and that when the little girl, named Célénie Leblond, was born—the Chevalier visiting Aïssé constantly at the time, himself going for the *accoucheuse*—Lady Bolingbroke had the babe conveyed to London, whence she herself brought her back later to France and placed her with her own step-daughter at the convent school at Sens under the name of "Miss Black," and under the supposition also that she was Lord Bolingbroke's niece.

By a curious coincidence, the birth of little Célénie was almost coincident with the death of the Regent, and distracted though she was by the more pressing interest, one may well suppose that the Regent's death roused in Aïssé some poignant emotion. She remembered how she had then held up before him the sanctity of the love ideal, and had told him that to give herself as mistress to any man would seem to her the commission of a crime against her womanhood. Had she then committed a crime? She had indeed found in love that ethereal mystery of which she had dreamed, but

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aissé

in permitting herself the indulgence of it had she not dragged it down to the mire of earth? For truly, through all its joy and glory, there had come upon her a sense of deep, spiritual abasement. Aissé never gives a hint of her own feelings at that time, and to try to lift the veil in which she has herself shrouded that holy event in a true woman's life would seem an impertinence, almost a sacrilege. Yet one may conjecture how it was Aissé's fate to discover in her passage through the valley of the shadow that the purest spiritual joy, however beautiful and soul-satisfying, has its inevitable consequence on the material plane. To every plane its own law, and the more terrible may be the enforcement of that law when the joy has been snatched in defiance of conventional ordinances. Like Ishmael, her nameless child was as the child of the bond-woman, not of the free. In sorrow and suffering she had to realise that every daughter of Eve who becomes a mother illustrates in her maternity the eternal law of the creation of worlds—the clothing of the divine idea in matter, and the descent of the spirit into flesh through darkness, travail and pain.

And now we come to the last authentic records of Mademoiselle Aissé's life—the collection made by M. Edmond Asse of her letters to Madame de Calandrini, with certain biographical particulars of the fair Circassian's career. These include the brief biographical sketch, presumably by Mademoiselle Rieu, Madame Calandrini's grand-daughter, Voltaire's notes on the original manuscript, and also some later letters of the Chevalier d'Aydie to Madame du Deffand, with hers to him. Likewise in this fascinating compilation are slight but charming reminiscences of relatives and descendants of Aissé and her lover.

Had the collection contained any of the correspond-

Finger-Prints of Time

ence of Aissé and the Chevalier what a priceless human document would have been open to us! What a picture of highly refined and disinterested attachment between two noble souls, of the struggles of sensitive conscience, of the anguish of a mother forced to deny her motherhood, and of the final surrender of passion at the foot of the altar—truly an apotheosis of love.

But why the sacrifice? Why should not the union have been legitimised? Why should not Aissé have acceded to the Chevalier's wish and become his wife? Why should they not have acknowledged their child, as he himself did after Aissé's death, and, with the example of the Bolingbrokes before them, have proved true love triumphant over convention?

That is the question which all the readers of Mademoiselle Aissé's biography must ask. Its answer lies in one of the anomalies of Aissé's character. Her very strength was in the rare sensibility of her nature and in the capacity for unselfish devotion, which likewise made her greatest weakness. Madame la Marquise de Créquy—a member of the d'Aydie family—touches upon the question in a letter to Aissé's daughter, Célénie, then Vicomtesse de Nanthia, and addressed by Madame de Créquy as "*Ma chère cousine.*" She quotes the dead woman's own explanation, writing, "*It is certain that the Chevalier wished to marry Mademoiselle Aissé, and that she said to my uncle, 'I am too much his friend to suffer it.'*"

"*She was wrong,*" continues Madame de Créquy. "*The Chevalier was everywhere esteemed: he would have had positions, appointments, pensions, and he shared them with her—an Oriental prince's full of virtue—there was enough to have turned people's heads.*"

That was probably true, but one has to remember that Madame de Créquy wrote sixty years later. When the Chevalier wooed Aissé he would naturally have lost

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

the benefices attached to his membership in the Order of St John of Jerusalem, and she had every reason to consider that marriage with her would mean the wrecking of a promising career.

To Madame de Créquy's testimony may be added that of Voltaire, who adds the following note to the original edition of Mademoiselle Aïssé's letters to Madame Calandrini:

"The Chevalier had taken his vows at Malta; afterwards he wished several times to be relieved from them in order that he might marry Mademoiselle Aïssé, which she never would allow him to do."

While the Calandrini's carefully preserved Mademoiselle Aïssé's letters and made what money they could out of them, those of Madame Calandrini to Aïssé appear to have been all destroyed. Naturally enough, seeing that Aïssé's nearest representatives after her death—her adopted brothers—strongly resented the publication of intimate details concerning their relatives, and especially the reflections upon their mother, about whom Aïssé expressed herself to her friend, Madame Calandrini, with injudicious frankness. After having indignantly questioned the authenticity of the letters, "*The Comte d'Argental*," writes that gentleman to the Marquis de Créquy, "*justly offended at the injury done to the memory of a much-respected mother, has demanded the suppression of the letters: he has not been able to obtain it because they have been printed in a foreign country.*"

Madame de Créquy settles the question of authenticity, about which there could be no real doubt, to her own satisfaction in a note to her copy of the letters, written by her own hand:

"These letters are assuredly by Mademoiselle Aïssé: and one feels them to be so."

Finger-Prints of Time

Madame Calandrini's letters to Aïssé, were they in existence, might throw some light on her own interesting but little known-personality. From the few outside hints one gleans of her character she seems to have been a strong-minded, firm-willed and extremely dominant woman, of stern religious views, such as one might expect from her Genevese associations, and at the same time with great powers of attraction.

To get a definite picture of her one must put on the Goloshes of Fortune once more and step into that vast gallery of space where the ghosts can be called at will.

Let us describe her as she may there be seen.

Beautiful as a young woman, and beautiful still at sixty—her age when she and Aïssé conceived for each other so deep a regard—Madame Calandrini had all the noted Pélissary charm of feature and colouring, which in her was combined with a certain magnetic quality, that acted with extraordinary effect upon those temperaments with which her own was affined, and undoubtedly that of Aïssé was so in a remarkable degree. She was slender almost to meagreness, her shoulders narrow and drooping, her chest slightly hollow, but her haughty carriage gave an appearance of height and great dignity. The features were sharp, the nose beaky, the mouth thin-lipped, but with very gracious and even fascinating curves. The hair, white and crisp, was peculiarly luxuriant and beautiful. Rolled high from her white forehead, on which a few little natural curls rested, and falling in thick loose curls at the nape of her neck, her coiffure gave her a look of great distinction. The eyes were a clear cold grey, particularly penetrating, slightly sidelong in their glance, but irresistible when their full battery was brought to bear upon anyone whom Madame meant to influence. And she was not slow in using her power, more especially upon young

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

women, whom, she would say, it was her great desire to guide safely through emotional pitfalls. In a very different fashion from Madame du Deffand, Madame Calandrini too was interested in the study of feeling, and, through the confidences of her young female friends, would dabble vicariously in the tender passions—from the highest motive, well understood! One of the secrets of Madame Calandrini's power in this respect was that she herself was strongly emotional. She would have been shocked at the idea of indulging in the ordinary human passion. How she had come to marry, and what were her exact relations with M. Calandrini, history does not say. One may conjecture that she was too virtuous to have entirely satisfied the average husband.

Monsieur Calandrini would appear to have been a gentleman of less austere views and of considerable attractions. He is described at the time of his marriage as being young, full of health, with fine complexion and shape. There is the hint in one of Aïssé's letters that Madame slightly resented attentions paid him by other ladies. Says the girl:

"Permit me to make here some small coquetries to Monsieur votre mari. I am extremely touched by the little word he has put in your letter, and though you should beat him out of jealousy, I will tell him that I love him dearly."

And again this little pen sketch of the estimable lady at Geneva is suggestive.

"You are, I think, just returned to town, seated on the good sofa with your amiable daughters around you, and all your relations eager to see you. You enjoy the esteem and friendship of every one about you. You have no painful feeling to fight. How I should like to pass my days thus. . . ."

Finger-Prints of Time

She goes on:

"You know to whom I owe compliments and regards. Will you make them according to your choice. In regard to your husband I do not charge you with these. I have remarked that you are always a little jealous."

But if, as one may well conceive, Madame Calandrini put a check upon conjugal ardours, she knew no bounds in the ardours of spiritual emotion, and, had destiny ordered her lot differently, might almost have reached the ecstasy of the stigmata which has rewarded the devotion of some saintly nuns. How deeply outraged would she have felt could she have known of M. Arouet de Voltaire's comparison between her expenditure of passion on the religious plane and that of naughty Madame de Parabère, with her temperament of the Magdalen and her ebulliently sympathetic heart upon the purely human level. And yet there is a certain fundamental truth in the materialist Voltaire's saying that it was a liberation of the same force, in coarse and rarefied form.

To pluck Aissé, a brand from the burning, was the mission Madame de Calandrini, with solemn vows, undertook. When one adds to her personal charm a certain virile strength and a fanatical determination in carrying out any purpose she believed right, it is easier to realise the manner in which she dominated so essentially feminine and clinging a creature as Aissé, whose enthusiastic devotion to the elder woman was the means by which Madame Calandrini's influence gained entrance and finally took the citadel. But it was not for a long time, and not until after many struggles, that she achieved her conquest and forced Aissé to give up the indulgence of her love for the Chevalier.

That was the inevitable end, however; the effect of the stronger and more determined mind acting

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

upon the weaker. Madame Calandrini's hands were strengthened likewise by the fact that Aïssé had always been a deeply religious woman. It was impossible that she could reconcile the life she was living, however sweet it might be, with the tenets of the Church in which Father François had carefully reared her. There was no Father François now, or any other priest to whom she could take her difficulties in the hope that they would be understood. She writes to her friend in Geneva:

"I have no one to whom I can open my heart. If I had you, you would support me, you would give me strength, and perhaps your counsels, my remorse, and the friendship I have for you, would give me courage to overcome a passion which my reason has never been able to conquer, but which it condemns."

And yet, to tear herself away from her lover was truly to tear away a piece of her heart. Aïssé's love for the Chevalier was neither voluntary nor conscious; it was the natural and inevitable fusion of two beings into one, each of whom was the complement of the other. Therefore, in sacrificing her love for this man to the voluntary and conscious love and respect she had for Madame Calandrini, Aïssé was sacrificing her very self.

This throws some light upon the problem of her surrender.

It does not appear how or when Mademoiselle Aïssé first made acquaintance with Madame Calandrini, the woman who was to exercise so stupendous an influence over the closing portion of her life, and who, from the first, set herself to undermine this unfortunate attach-

Finger-Prints of Time

ment, which, according to her puritanical notions, was taking the hapless Aïssé straight to perdition.

Probably the introduction came about through the Bolingbrokes.

A connection by marriage existed between the family of Harry St John and the highly-respectable and cultured one of Péliissary at Geneva, in which there were a great many daughters, one of whom, Julie, was Madame Calandrini; another, Angélique, was the second wife of Bolingbroke's father, Lord St John of Battersea—or Bettersea, as Aïssé spells it. Angélique, Lady St John, was mother of the charming, spoilt Henrietta Knight, Lord Bolingbroke's adored half-sister.

A romance in itself, the story of Henrietta, and of her inharmonious marriage with Mr Robert Knight, afterwards Lord Luxborough, of which Aïssé often speaks. But this in parenthesis.

Possibly the acquaintance was made through d'Aydie's friend, the fellow-knight, who cherished so blameless and knightly a devotion for the exquisite Madame Rieu. That may have been the very reason why Madame Calandrini, in a fit of virtuous apprehension, came from Geneva to guard her daughter from the snares of this Babylon—Paris. But it does not appear, from the few deprecatory messages conveyed by Aïssé to her friend from her lover, that d'Aydie had any personal communication with Madame Calandrini, and most certainly that excellent lady would not, in the circumstances of his relation with Aïssé, have given him a warm welcome into her austere heart.

The letters of Mademoiselle Aïssé to her friend are there for all who will to read. Their spontaneity is their chief merit. In M. Edmond Asse's volume one has an opportunity of comparing them with those of Madame du Deffand to the Chevalier. Certainly Aïssé's letters suffer considerably from the comparison. Aïssé's

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

epistolary style suggests the portable writing equipment, carried from chair and table to the knee and a cushion on the floor. There is no doubt, however, that the fair Circassian was fond of gossip, and retailed it with easy zest. Her stories are sometimes scurrilous, never coarse. With all her loyalty to Madame de Parabère she cannot resist throwing sidelights on that lady's love-affairs with "Monsieur Premier" de Beringham, M. le Marquis d'Alincourt, as well as on the love affairs of a good many others. Of her own—apart from her great passion—she has naturally very little to say. Faithful Berthier de Sauvigny still hangs round. He has actually withdrawn his application for the Embassy at Constantinople in favour of Pont de Veyle, with evident hope of pleasing Aïssé, who is grateful, but she can never feel anything more for Berthier than esteem. Madame Rieu is to be told this, because she had declared that Aïssé would love Berthier some day. But Berthier is sulky, for Aïssé is never at home when he calls. He would "*like her to be like Berenice, passing her days awaiting him, and her nights in weeping.*" Poor Berthier! Aïssé has the happy notion of passing him on to Madame du Deffand, who is dying for a romance. But Berthier must be persuaded to cut something off each side of his *perruque*, and Aïssé, who is asked to undertake the mission, is of opinion that half Berthier's importance lies in his enormous wig.

Mademoiselle Aïssé's pages read sometimes like a society column of to-day. Most of the persons in the French peerage walk through them, and everyone who is somebody has a place among the company, those prominent in art and literature as well as the notable aesthetes of the time. Here we find the oft-quoted picture of that abnormality, the Duc de Gesvres—the object of Aïssé's childish *amours*. He is ill at St Ouen,

Finger-Prints of Time

where all France goes to see him, in a bed decked with flowers, ribbons and lace—green hangings, green coverlet, green dressing-gown—attended by twenty courtesans dressed in fancy costumes of obligatory green. Also that other fantastic, the Duc d'Épernon, with his craze for gambling and for letting blood from anyone who would take payment for indulging his whim. Then we are told about the fashionable mania for playing cup and ball—an earlier form of diabolo, this—about the favourite card games—biribi, quadrille. "Do you no longer play at quadrille?" she asks. "Pour moi, I have absolutely abandoned it." And about the rage among smart women for cutting out prints and pictures and pasting them on screens and varnishing them, just as one did in the early Victorian fifties. . . .

Here too is a detailed account of the tragic end of Adrienne Lecouvreur. D'Argental, by the way, who had been the actress's lover, was left her executor. Then of that harmless young rake, d'Argental's new innamorata, la Pelissier, whose voice is no great thing and who answers to the anagram on her name "la Pileresse"; of the rivalry between her and la Le Maure; the intrigues of the Comédie Française; the productions of the day, theatrical and literary. "Madame Calandrini has not given her opinion," says Aïssé, "upon *Le Voyage de Gulliver*," a book by one "le Docteur Swift," which had made a prodigious stir in England. Aïssé's criticisms upon such matters displaying no real acumen, but seeming now like mere ghostly flashes from the past.

Aïssé never delivers an original *bon mot*: occasionally she quotes one—such as the immortal saying of witty Madame Cornuel, "*There are no heroes for valet-de-chambres*," and, *apropos* of her joy in receiving a letter from Madame de Calandrini, the remark which M. de Fontenelle made of a lady who pleased him, that

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

"the moment in which he beheld her was the present moment for him." There is one sad little aphorism, apparently of her own, however, which strikes a true note, at the close of a melancholy plaint concerning the need for patience in dealing with Madame de Ferriol's moods:

"Nothing is sadder than to have no reason for doing one's duty, save that it is one's duty."

From Swift's *Gulliver* we pass by natural transition to the doings of my lord Bolingbroke and his family. There are long paragraphs about their comings and goings; about the marital infelicities of Henrietta Knight, who is *"more in love with marriage than with the husband."* And, touching marriage, Aïssé delivers herself on the subject of Madame du Deffand's probationary reconciliation with her husband, which ends in the Marquise being so bored, after *"the most beautiful friendship in the world during six weeks,"* that the Marquis departs and an old lover, whose name Mademoiselle Aïssé discreetly suppresses, comes back and takes his place. On which Aïssé has the courage to represent to her friend *"all the infamy of her proceedings,"* and to avoid her for three weeks.

But Madame comes weeping and imploring the girl not to forsake her, and Aïssé, herself an erring one, relents. This throws a curious light upon the cold, selfish, brilliant Madame du Deffand, illuminating somewhat her later relations with Julie de l'Espinasse.

In the case of Madame de Tencin, however, Aïssé maintains her unconquerable aversion to the end. There are various passages-of-arms between the two, and the girl entertains Madame de Calandrini with much invidious criticism of the ex-nun.

"Madame de Tencin is always ill," she writes.

Finger-Prints of Time

" Savans and priests are now almost the only persons who pay her court. They tell me, however, that she has grown fatter. . . . I continue to see nothing of her, and I think that will remain so during the rest of my life—unless the Archbishop on his return desires otherwise . . . it is a great satisfaction to me not to have this painful duty to perform."

Regard for his high position in the Church no doubt restrains Aïssé from writing in any but respectful, and indeed in some places appreciative, terms of the Abbé de Tencin, Cardinal - Archbishop. • But occasionally the animus declares itself in some more or less thinly-veiled coupling of him with his sister in her strictures upon the latter. Madame de Tencin, who should certainly have feathered her nest sufficiently to be independent of ordinary losses, is furious because, with all her influence, she has got back only three hundred livres of the tax levied upon annuities. Aïssé has been more lucky in her appeal to Cardinal Fleury, though her little yearly income is reduced to two thousand francs—half its original amount. The girl makes her own and Madame Calandrini's pecuniary difficulties the text for a moral homily and for an enthusiastic encomium upon Madame de Calandrini's virtues. . . .

" Pour vous, Madame . . . you are well recompensed by the satisfaction of having nothing to reproach yourself with: you have virtue: you are loved and esteemed, and consequently you have more friends. . . . However great may be the calamities inflicted by chance," remarks Aïssé, tritely, " those which one draws upon oneself are a hundred times more cruel. Do you find that an unfrocked nun, that a cadet cardinal, are happy loaded with riches? They might well exchange their false happiness for your misfortunes."

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

Relations continue strained with Madame de Tencin. She complains to her sister that Aïssé has not been for six months to ask after her, and announces that in future she will forbid her the door of her house. Aïssé blesses this noble indignation against herself, of which she informs Madame Calandrini:

"Madame de Tencin has declared open war. She sends to know whether I am dining here in order not to come if I am there. . . . I was pressed the other day to make my peace with her. I replied that I asked nothing better . . . but that I did not feel myself sufficiently religious to present my second cheek. . . . The de la Fresnais accident has embittered her against everyone except those who are necessary to her. I have said that it was the most unfortunate affair in the world, and that no one can be safe from a madman who comes and kills himself in your house."

Everyone knows about the Fresnais affair which exiled Madame de Tencin from Paris for a while and brought her into very bad odour. An old lover, whom she had made use of and then ruined in the downfall of Law's system, had committed suicide in her study, leaving a letter accusing her of having driven him to the deed. Her friends afterwards forsook her and she suspected a slight everywhere. But Madame de Tencin was too clever not to overcome a little scandal like that. Like Brer Rabbit, she lay low, expending her energies on the composition of her novels, which were published after her death, and posing as a champion of the Church. But no doubt she found it inconvenient to be at daggers drawn with a young lady who had influential acquaintances, so in due course Aïssé describes an unexpected meeting in Madame de Ferriol's room, the momentary embarrassment of the de Tencin, who, however, with her

Finger-Prints of Time

usual *finesse*, seized the opportunity to make an overture: admires Aissé's dress, inquires after Madame Calandrini, comments on the health of her sister, converses as though nothing had been amiss, and the quarrel is patched up.

"Madame de Tencin loves me madly; what do you think of that?" Aissé writes to her friend, and adds, *"I wish she may not see the repulsion I feel for her."*

Madame de Tencin drops away among the shadows so far as concerns the remainder of this history. Her star is at this period in obscurity. Later on, we hear of her, with her *salon* re-established under more decorous auspices, exploiting Madame de la Popelinière, wife of the financier, and training in the arts of intrigue the future Madame de Pompadour. Social godmother she is, too, of homely Madame Geoffrin, to whom she gives lessons in the management of a *salon*, and who, as Madame de Tencin herself cynically remarks, waits for the ex-nun's reversion, including the friendship of Fontenelle.

Fontenelle, the man whose heart is a thinking machine, and who goes every evening to Madame de Tencin's because she gives him the dishes he likes for supper. No, Claudine de Tencin, despised by all, feared by some, loved by none, was not a woman who would ever allow herself to be thrust under.

Not so her sister. A picture of sordid decline is that of Madame de Ferriol's later days. All the elegance gone. With years, gout and bile she has grown enormously stout. A shrewish, ill-dressed, miserly housewife! Where is the graceful, bright-eyed, fashionably-attired Madame la Présidente, who in looped train and satin petticoat, lace fichu, rouge, patches, dangling chain—all the fallals and furbelows

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

of the Regency—used to hold court in the yellow-and-gold *salon*, where the gilding has grown tarnished and the brocades dingy with wear?

Aïssé makes Madame Calandrini her *confidante* in her sufferings from the constant *tracasseries* at the Hôtel de Ferriol.

"Bad temper reigns here to a point that is insupportable. . . . The outside world judges only by the label, and my troubles may appear merely trifles. Alas! nothing is a trifle that happens every day. . . ."

And again :

"I will say that the mistress of this house is much more difficult to live with than was the poor Ambassador. I know not on which foot to dance. If I stay indoors it is in order that people may think I am forced to do so. If I go out, I am frightfully scolded. I am contradicted incessantly. I am caressed afterwards, till an angel would become impatient. . . ."

So things go on. "'Notre dame' is more tiresome and unreasonable than ever." Impossible to take Madame de Ferriol seriously. A cross old-woman-child of whom Aïssé has the charge; her affairs are in utter disorder; her mind is as the troubled sea. She finds everyone is in the wrong. The favourite little dog—he is a black spaniel and his name is Clément—flees from his mistress. The old lackey answers her insolently, and Madame suffers it, while Aïssé "*would like to throw the fire-iron at the man's head.*" But Madame takes her revenge on the other servants and rates them till they are in tears, while Aïssé tries to console them.

Now, "*Madame is of a weight that is appalling.*" She will not go to Pont de Veyle, nor thence to drink the waters of Bourbon as her physician commands. The Président is detained by an interminable law-suit;

Finger-Prints of Time

she complains that he will spend too much if she leaves him behind. *Eh bien !* he will go with her by posting or by diligence. But no, she cannot afford the journey. Her brother, the Archbishop, will give her the money. No, she must know first whether Madame de Bolingbroke is coming to Paris. Madame de Bolingbroke is not coming till the winter. The real difficulty is that poor Madame de Ferriol does not want to leave the Maréchal, who does not care a rap and will not move a step to please her . . .

Aïssé is bitterly disappointed. From Pont de Veyle she herself would have gone to visit Madame Calandrini. Now she would not have the pleasure of embracing her friend : and she "*would have sold everything to her last chemise for that.*"

As for Président Augustin, his too is a sordid decline. Aïssé does not often mention him. Apparently he is a cipher in the household.

"*M. de Ferriol,*" she writes, "*is always the best man in the world ; his health is the same ; his affairs also, always regarded with a perfect indifference. But he is not indifferent in respect of the Molinists. On that subject he is impassioned and puts himself in a fury when he finds someone who does not think as he does . . . it is enough to make one die with laughing.*"

It may be observed that, notwithstanding all she had gone through, Aïssé is able to laugh at much she meets in life. But she is young still ; she has many friends and many interests. And though there is always the sad secret at the back, the child whom she is debarred from acknowledging, she has all this time the love of the Chevalier to sustain her. Madame Calandrini has not as yet succeeded with the pruning-knife which is to cut short all Aïssé's joys and sorrows, and her

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

life with them. But Madame Calandrini, with her extreme religious views, we may be sure, is directing an under-current of influence on Aïssé all the time.

Religious opinions are divided in the Hôtel de Ferriol. Madame has taken up Jansenism, though Aïssé commends her for not making scenes with her husband on that point. Aïssé will herself have no truck with Jansenism. Sophie shares her detestation. But alas! in the life she is leading, poor Aïssé is denied the consolation of the Confessional.

M. de Ferriol grows duller and heavier; he eats a great deal.

"M. de Ferriol is well enough, but horribly deaf and greedy," writes Aïssé. Things are in a bad way in the paternal household. Madame's affairs are gone to wreck. She pays no one. She is the cause of a terrible disappointment to Aïssé. Mississippi shares are at a low price in the market and expected to rise. Aïssé sells her diamond buckles for eighteen hundred francs. She is going to make a profitable investment in shares—to lay by a pretty sum for the future "*dot*" of the "little one." Madame comes into her room; Madame is in straits for money and borrows a thousand francs. "It will be repaid on the morrow," she says. But six months have gone and the debt is still owing. The shares have risen and are now unpurchasable. But for that unlucky loan the "little one" would have had her nest-egg, the promised wages would have been paid Sophie; now there is nothing but six hundred francs, which clear off a few pressing bills.

Aïssé is pathetically resigned to her ill luck.

"Life is so mixed with sorrows that it is necessary, Madame, for one to be less sensitive," she says to her friend, and adds, "I who speak to you—I kill myself with sensibility."

Finger-Prints of Time

Madame de Ferriol is of an "*avarice inconceivable*." The bill of fare has been cut down to the fewest items possible. The food is cold; it goes from bad to worse. At this time d'Argental has a recrudescence of family affection; he comes again to his mother's house. Reaction perhaps from his gay life! The wild oats for that year have been reaped; the field lies fallow. He is "*the prettiest young man of the world. He makes his métier with application. He works after dinner until five o'clock. He is no longer in love; his affections remain constant only to little patties. But alas! there are none.*" The cuisine is now impossible. The household is fed on the system of the man who diminishes his horse's food daily until the animal is brought down to a straw a day. They are dying of hunger. D'Argental prefers to sup elsewhere.

His mother is deeply hurt. Aïssé invents excuses for d'Argental. She takes the young man to task, endeavours to point out his filial duty. But d'Argental resents the interference; he leaves her room angrily. It is as if a thunderbolt had fallen. Aïssé is stunned. By-and-by, Pont de Veyle enters and finds her weeping. Madame Calandrini may well be astonished when she is told. Since d'Argental came into the world, behold it is the first time that they two have quarrelled—d'Argental, her brother, her protector! At the end of twenty-seven years to lose her friend!

For four days they do not speak; then, at last, Aïssé timidly makes an advance; she drinks to his health at table. Next day she embraces him without explanation. Now they are "*fort bien ensemble*."

D'Argental is always the one whom Aïssé loves. To the excellent qualities of Pont de Veyle she renders full tribute, but there is a jealous touch in her remark that Madame de Ferriol never complains of Pont de

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

Veyle. He does what he chooses. Nevertheless, he is *tres-bon garçon*, who has intellect and subtlety. But his health is delicate. Aïssé fears that they may lose him, and that would be a serious loss. "M. de Pont de Veyle"—there is always a certain formality in her allusions to him—"he is a man who has all the most essential qualities." She breaks off her letter to receive "M. de Pont de Veyle," who has that moment arrived. M. de Pont de Veyle is evidently a person of consideration in her eyes. She would never dare—nor would there ever be any occasion—to point out to him the path of duty. But d'Argental—that is quite another thing! The note of genuine feeling rings in every trivial sentence she writes about the younger of her adopted brothers. He is never—except when he misbehaves himself with an opera-singer—"Monsieur d'Argental."

"D'Argental begs me to recall him to your remembrance," she writes to Madame Calandrini. "We are great friends; he is charming. He is loved by everybody, and he deserves it."

Again:

"D'Argental has had the small-pox and is very much marked. We were so happy to see him that we have received him as if he were Cupid. One cannot say that he is a beautiful young man, but assuredly he is an amiable one. Everyone who knows him says flattering things of him. . . ."

They are pathetic reading, the letters of Mademoiselle Aïssé, even in their lightest phases.

They bring back the dead times—those scribblings—the withered roses, the antique graces, the never-changing domestic joys and sorrows, the fads and follies of *les dames mortes* and *les beaux messieurs* in powder and peruke, who were as human, or yet more so, than we of to-day. Often, it seems a mere skimming

Finger-Prints of Time

of the shallows, this chit-chat of every-day matters; a pleasure-boat skirting velvety banks where Watteau lords and ladies play Arcadian games, laughing, dancing, cheating, making love and quarrelling by turns. And the flowers give out their perfume, and the birds sing, and the sun shines. Sometimes there comes wet weather and then everybody is ill-tempered and things don't go so prettily.

And there are terrifying glimpses of a dark and deadly tide of tragedy flowing side by side with the frothy current of ordinary social life. Black depths into which Aïssé dare not look, of which she is indeed barely conscious, until in the name of friendship and of religious duty Madame Calandrini adjures her to shun temptation and to save her immortal soul.

CHAPTER VIII

ASHES OF ROSES

ONE may read very plainly, in all the more personal portions of Aissé's letters to Madame Calandrini, the story of the poor girl's struggle against the compelling forces of friendship and of creed. The terms of reverential admiration, and almost extravagant affection in which, from time to time, Aissé addresses the elder woman, show how great an ascendancy the stronger nature soon gained over the weaker. Such phrases as these:

"My heart is incessantly occupied with you, and my regrets are as lively as on the day when you left Paris."

And later:

"I would give a pint of my blood in order that we might be together again."

Or:

"If you bade me walk on my head for love of you I would do so with joy,"

sound a little absurd in these days, but, allowing for Gallic locutions of that time, represent accurately enough Aissé's enthusiastic sentiments towards her new friend. It was not long before Madame Calandrini became possessed of Aissé's secret. The letters go over a period of about seven years, and in the first one, dated 1726, immediately after a visit made

Ashes of Roses

by the lady from Geneva to Paris, Aïssé writes of her lover:

"The Chevalier is in Périgord, where his health is never too good. However, he assures me there is no danger. He is more tender than ever : his letters are all like those I showed you in the coach some time before your departure."

And about the same time she says:

"I would send you copies of his letters if I dared; but no, there are things in them which would displease you, and I should be ashamed that you should see them."

In truth there seems a certain sacredness in the first trembling confidences of the Circassian to Madame Calandrini, who already appears to romantic Aïssé the perfect model of all that a mature woman counsellor should be. It was a confession in which mingled love and friendship, both longing to pour themselves forth, shame at the illicit nature of the bond, yet withal a truly feminine pride in the lover's noble qualities and ardent devotion. One can picture the bringing forth of the Chevalier's treasured letters as the two women sat in the coach together, and Madame Calandrini's interest in the affair all the more vivid for its appeal to the emotional religious element in herself. Here was a sinner to be reclaimed, an innocent sinner almost, this exquisite, child-like creature with her Eastern heredity, her romantic career, former trials, and the innate purity that had yielded only to overwhelming love. Yes, here was indeed a soul of more than common value, which it should be her—Madame Calandrini's—glorious mission to snatch out of the very arms of Satan.

Madame Calandrini was too wise not to go gently in the beginning. There is no question that she was

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

immensely attracted to the girl, and that there was nothing feigned in her expressions of affection. Her sympathy, too, was no doubt, in its way, very genuine; her exhortations were calculated to encourage, rather than to rebuff Aïssé in the opening of her heart. In her own early letters Madame must have asked for news of the Chevalier, which Aïssé is only too happy to give. It is plain, however, from Aïssé's reluctance to show her friend more of her lover's letters, that even at the onset the strict-minded Genevese lady could not hide her repugnance at the fervid language in which doubtless d'Aydie's unlawful passion was couched.

Nevertheless, one feels that though Aïssé realises in a measure Madame Calandrini's attitude she is rather like a child playing beside a precipice, and that she has not considered fully where that disburdening of her soul in the coach may finally land her. At this period she appears happy, but for the necessity of concealing her love-relation and the trials of Madame de Ferriol's parsimonious habits. Aïssé is a woman who has always relished the small pleasures of life. Her health has not yet begun to suffer, as it soon does from the trouble of her mind. She enjoys her vacations at Ablon and the long days spent in shooting. Madame la Duchesse de Berry had started the craze for sport among Parisian women. Aïssé "*is tanned like a crow*," her feet are tired from her "*courses*." But she sleeps well and has a good appetite. She basks in the sunshine and bathes in the Seine. "*Have you a river*," she asks, "*near your country house?*" She mixes with zest in the society of Paris. Not yet has she been caught in the dark tide of tragedy. The Chevalier spends five months with his family in Périgord; it appears that he often goes there, evidently to the detriment of his health. For from this time Aïssé speaks of his suffering frequently from asthma.

Ashes of Roses

After his return it would seem that the assault from Geneva becomes more persistent and more determined, and Aïssé is forced to recognise Madame Calandrini's unflinching attitude of condemnation towards the *liaison*. It is as the tortures of the rack to the poor girl's sensitive conscience. How can she defy this woman of ripe judgment and deep religious conviction, whom she reveres beyond everyone else in the world, and who tells her that she is travelling along the road that leads to destruction, conjuring her by all that is holy to retrace her steps and suffer the friend who yearns for her salvation to lead her back to the foot of the Cross. And so Aïssé stands trembling at a parting of the ways: the voice of Madame Calandrini and the ghostly echo of Father François's teachings bidding her choose renunciation of the flesh and eternal peace of the spirit; while the voice of her beloved, and the piteous cry of her own heart—claiming its human birthright—urge her to obey the kindly law of Nature and to set at naught the self-denying ordinance of man. For in Aïssé's simple conception of the obligations of love, absolute fidelity and readiness on the Chevalier's part to set aside worldly interests in order that he might legalise their union seems ratification as binding as though they two had really gone through the marriage rite.

It is the old story: the immemorial justification of lovers who make a law unto themselves; their stumbling-block and the stone of offence to moralists of all time. Naturally Madame Calandrini takes the view of the moralists—the view which invariably comes out right in the end. Knights of St John, vowed to celibacy though living in the world, do not abound in the twentieth century, but Madame Calandrini's moral arguments apply to hundreds of men and women in our midst to-day who count the world well lost for love

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

and do not find that they have made a satisfactory bargain. The plea that Aïssé herself refuses to accept her lover's sacrifice does not commend the irregular situation any the more to Madame Calandrini. One may suspect that she showed doubt concerning d'Aydie's willingness to try and get a dispensation from his vows, and it is pathetic to note how Aïssé produces with thinly-veiled triumph the convincing proof of his honourable intentions.

"*You will be greatly astonished, Madame,*" she writes, "*when I tell you that he has again offered to marry me.*" And then she describes the proposal as having taken place in the presence of a third party, a friend who seems to have been there for the express purpose of hearing the Chevalier renew his offer. The supposition is that the friend was Madame du Deffand, a witness for the two-fold object of convincing both Madame Calandrini and herself of the Chevalier's good faith, and in order to silence the scurrilous tongues which had been busying themselves over the names of the fair Circassian and the Knight of Malta. It is a natural conjecture that Madame du Deffand, who had suffered so much from the darts of scandal, should, atheist though she was, be keenly anxious for Aïssé's rehabilitation in the eyes of the world. It appears more than likely that she and d'Aydie concocted a plan between them, for Aïssé makes it evident from her mode of imparting the news to Madame Calandrini that she herself was incapable of conniving at any such preconceived situation. Nothing would induce her to consent to the proposal. "*Whatever happiness it would be for me to marry the Chevalier,*" she says, "*it is my duty to think of him, not of myself.*" She "*cares too much for his reputation to injure it.* She has at the same time too much pride to let him commit this folly. And how could she flatter herself that he would continue to

Ashes of Roses

feel to her as he now does. He might repent of having yielded to his mad passion, and she could never survive the double sorrow of having done him an injury and of being no longer loved." He tells her of his hope that at least, when the world's opinion cannot matter to either of them, they may spend the rest of their lives together, and suggests that they should agree to make cession, each to the survivor, of all their worldly goods. At which Aïssé, with whimsical pathos, turns the question into a jest over her old underskirts, the only inheritance she can ensure to him. She had sold almost all her jewels for the provision of "*la pauvre petite*" and the payment of her own debts. Probably the underskirts, no doubt of quilted satin or cloth of silver, worn under the trains of flowered brocade for ceremonial dress, were really the most valuable property she possessed.

The letters give no indication of how Madame Calandrini received the news of this proposal of marriage, and Aïssé's uncompromising rejection of it. She may have maintained a non-committal silence, which appears to have been a way in which Madame Calandrini showed her displeasures. In one of poor Aïssé's letters there comes the poignant reproach:

"Your silence resembles that of forgetfulness, of ingratitude. In the name of God, remember that you are that person whom I love and esteem most in the world."

Very likely Madame de Calandrini had her own religious opinions as to the inviolability of a Knight of Malta's vows. Or, like Madame de Créquy later, she may have regarded Aïssé's refusal as a piece of sublime Quixotry which it was no use to combat. As there is no evidence of her joining forces with Madame du Defland in the endeavour to persuade Aïssé into marriage with the Chevalier, the assumption is that *that*

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

solution of the difficulty did not appeal to her. Apparently separation of the erring lovers was what she aimed at. That she impressed this upon Aïssé as the only righteous course may be gleaned from the poor girl's replies to those letters from Geneva to which we have no chance of referring.

Aïssé renews her futile arguments.

In addition to the loss of his reputation and worldly status she will not do Blaize d'Aydie the further wrong of making him a beggar, since he depends for his subsistence almost altogether upon the benefices of the Order. And her own little yearly income has now been reduced to half its original amount. Does she regret that generous impulse which caused her to burn the document by which her Aga had assured her a marriage portion? No, she cannot profit by money from the de Ferriol side, which would be their loss. But could the Ambassador have had d'Aydie's position in his mind?

The girl is torn and tossed in every direction.

"I have impulses sometimes very hard to keep in check," she says to her friend. *"What is surprising is, that I have had them all my life. Alas! why were not you Madame de Ferriol? You would have taught me to appreciate virtue."*

And in another letter, *"You ask for news of my heart?"* she says. And answers the question with pathetic caution. Her heart is well content as regards the one supreme thing, save for the difficulties that seem insurmountable. The attachment, the consideration, the tenderness of her lover, she declares, are greater than ever; the esteem and gratitude on her part something more than she dares to tell. ~~Alas!~~ she is tormented by the idea which Madame Calandrini has developed in her, but which she has not the cour-

Ashes of Roses

age to entertain. Meanwhile, the mode of her life debars Aissé from the Confessional, therefore this friend, who has taken the place of her spiritual director, delivers always the same unwavering counsel. There is no other course open but to give up the cherished sin.

To give up the man she loves, that might be possible, even at the cost of her life. But to give up the father of her child, the poor little, helpless child, who is being brought up at the convent at Sens totally ignorant of her true parentage, deeming herself without a relative in the world, or a friend, except the good nuns who take care of her. Certainly, to these the little Célénie must add my lady Bolingbroke, a rare visitor from England, who, she is told, is her guardian, and a certain Swiss woman whose name is Sophie, and who has an aunt in the neighbourhood, from whose cottage she sometimes comes to see little Célénie at the convent. Sophie is the confidential maid of Célénie's one other visitor—dearest and most strangely, mysteriously tender to the child—the lovely, gracious lady from Paris, who once a year stays for a little while with the Abbess of Sens. On these occasions the lady takes the child frequently with her into her bare little cell-chamber, and holding Célénie to her bosom questions her searchingly on all that concerns her studies and her well-being, while the fond arms embrace the little creature, oh! so lovingly, and the sweet lips smile so sadly, and the great dark eyes are swimming with tears.

Surely never was young mother in so pitiful a case. With a heart full of exquisitely maternal tenderness forced to deny her own offspring, to curb the flow of her affection, to play the part of a mere stranger interested in Lady Bolingbroke's *protégée*! For Célénie's and the Chevelier's sake to guard her secret closely,

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

even from the Abbess, who is Lady Bolingbroke's step-daughter. No wonder that Aïssé was glad to relieve her surcharged heart in writing to Madame Calandrini of her child.

"Pardon all my weaknesses for the sake of the candid confession I make of them, and permit me to speak to you of 'la petite.' She is charming," writes the poor mother. "Everything that comes to me about her keeps me from repenting of her birth, and I fear that the poor little one does not weep for that any more than I. She gets prettier every day. I sent Sophie on the pretext of seeing her aunt, and she has been there fifteen days and is enchanted with her. All the convent adores her. She has sense, goodness, firmness. They pulled four teeth out of her mouth: she did not utter a cry. The nuns praised her and she answered, 'What use would it have been for me to cry? They had to be pulled out.' . . . She told Sophie that she was very sorry I should not be able to go this year to see her: that she begged me to come another year, and that she thanked me for all my kindness that she knew I was often worried about her, and that she would do everything she could to learn to be good. . . . She is very engaging: the poor little thing knows already, I think, the need of being so. Her 'bon ami' is in despair at not being able to see her: he loves her to distraction. he takes fits of wanting to go and see her, which I have great difficulty in combating. We are working to make her a dot in case she does not care to be a nun. If God lends us life she will have forty thousand livres, and four hundred livres of income. She will marry very well in the provinces with that: 'Mais gare au pot à lait'; if she had the misfortune to lose us she would be very much to be pitied. I shall recommend her to d'Argental. . . . The Chevalier has already placed two thousand crowns for her alone. . . ."

Ashes of Roses

Now again the Chevalier is ailing—this time more seriously. Madame de Ferriol also has bad health. They talk anew of her going to Pont de Veyle, and thence to do a cure in the neighbourhood. Aissé is distracted between the different claims. The Chevalier himself points out to her that it is her duty to go with Madame de Ferriol. Then, too, Geneva is not so very far from Pont de Veyle, and when the family are installed at the château Aissé may take the opportunity to visit her friend. But at this time the girl cannot bring herself to leave the Chevalier. She describes her state of mind.

"Duty, love, anxiety and friendship battle incessantly in my heart. I am in the most cruel agitation; my body succumbs; I am crushed with apprehension and sadness."

By-and-by the visit to Château Pont de Veyle, long delayed by Madame de Ferriol's uncertain humours, comes off at last. It is a momentous one for Aissé. From this time, in spite of shrinkings, waverings, futile protests, the martyrdom becomes inevitable. Madame Calandrini has conquered.

The girl spends some weeks at Geneva. It is a proof of the Genevese woman's magnetic power that while in her immediate companionship Aissé falls completely under her friend's sway. There must have been soul-stirring exhortations on the part of Madame Calandrini, judging by Aissé's piteous letters on her return. The troublous tale of Aissé's subjugation is best told in her own words. Moreover, here are one or two vivid little pen sketches of the French *vie de province* some hundred and seventy years agone.

"I cannot describe to you, Madame, the grief I felt in leaving you. My heart is so full that I thought it

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

would choke me. The fear of making you too sad forced me to put a constraint on myself . . . so that you should not see my tears, but it gave me a frightful headache. If I had not the certainty of seeing you again I do not know of what I might be capable. . . . Life seems to me so short for one to experience in it such great suffering, that I scarcely desire friendship because of the fear I am in of exposing myself again to the pain in which I now am. But all that vanishes even while I think of it. I tell myself that I shall never find a friend who, like you, deserves to be loved at every point. I do not think any longer of the Retreat. . . . By that I should certainly entirely deprive myself of the hope of going to see you. And besides, Madame, I feel too strongly the consequences of such a decision, since we talked about it together. I can regulate my conduct as well in the world, and even better. The more difficult my task the greater the merit in accomplishing it, and I ought, in gratitude, to remain with Madame de Ferriol, who needs me. . . . Alas ! Madame. I recall continually our conversations in your study. I make efforts which kill me. All that I can promise you is not to spare myself in order to bring the one thing about. But, Madame, it will cost me my life, for the hopeful prospect is so distant that I shall die of old age before I arrive at it. . . .

"I am charged with a hundred thousand pretty things for you : it is only fair that I should deliver them. Here are two bits from his letters.

"A thousand respects to your friend. Assure her that there is so much sympathy in your manner of thought and mine that it would not be possible for me not to share with you the sentiments you have for her."

"In a previous one which I received at Lyons:

"I congratulate you upon the pleasure that you have had in seeing and embracing Madame Calandrini. I know your heart, and I am not surprised at the tears

Ashes of Roses

of joy that you have shed. I have shed some also, my dear Aisse, in reading your letter, and I was not more touched by the picture you give of your enthusiasm than by the eagerness with which Madame Calandrini received you.

" 'Impress upon her, I beg you, that I am extremely grateful for the proofs of her remembrance. The extent of one's appreciation of goodness ought to be the measure of one's respect for her. I believe her to be too just and too kind-hearted to condemn the friendship that you have for me. If you could picture to her the attachment that I have towards you. Tell her that there never has and that there never will be a moment in my life in which I shall cease to love you. Stay at Geneva as long as you can. I regret your absence less in imagining that there your health is safe. I am suffering from the fatigue of my return. Take care of yourself, my dear Aisse. Love me. That is the true root of my happiness in life.'

" There, Madame, are many things which may hurt my modesty, but which serve as an excuse for the slowness and feebleness of my struggle. Ah ! what a happiness it would be if one had the virtue to overcome such weakness ; for indeed it requires an infinite amount to enable one to resist somebody whom one has the misfortune to be powerless to resist. . . . To cut short a violent passion which is also the most tender and deeply-rooted friendship, and with gratitude joined to all that. It is frightful ! It is worse than death ! But you wish me to make the effort. Well, I will do so, but I doubt if I shall come out of it with honour, or even with life.

" I am afraid of going back to Paris ; I am afraid of everything which brings me nearer the Chevalier, and I find myself miserable in being separated from him. I do not know what I wish. . . . Why is my passion forbidden ? Why is it not innocent ? Think of your Aisse, and rest assured of all her affection and of all her respect, for they are very great."

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

The next letter is a shade less melancholy.

"I have delayed writing to you because I have been indisposed from a very violent colic. I have not failed to tell myself that it was you who preserved me from it till now, for I had nothing of it at Geneva; the illness respected my joy; it would have done better not to mix itself with my sorrow. I was in great grief when I quitted you; your letters have wrung my heart and renewed my tears. I recall continually the sweetness, the peace, and the frank confidence of my short stay with you. The people whom I met at Geneva seemed to answer to my early ideas about human nature and not to my later experience of mankind. . . . I have not had a moment's satisfaction since our parting. . . . I find here colics, night dews, concerts! fleas! rats!—and what is worse—men—not of the old rock—but of the new. . . ."

She goes on:

"I have given your compliments to the Archbishop and to the rest, who thank you for them. He made me describe to him your country-house, the manner in which you live in town; in a word, he informed himself about everything, maybe out of friendship for you, maybe in order to say agreeable things to me. He succeeded very well. . . ."

Presumably her brother, the Archbishop of Embrun, was Madame de Ferriol's guest at this time.

"Otherwise," Aïssé goes on, "we spend our time here sadly enough. In the morning, after mass, the Archbishop shuts himself up with a Jesuit until dinner-time. After dinner, a game of quadrille full of greed and bitterness, all for five sous, which one does not pay. There

Ashes of Roses

is always some company from the town, not very entertaining, and to whom one has to be as ceremonious as to the provincial intendants. Towards evening they go out for a walk. The mistress of the house and I remain—the one knitting, the other reading or cutting out pictures. After the walk an ear-splitting concert. An extremely bad supper—one has neither good fish nor friends. Think of the difference for me between this and that sojourn at Geneva, and of the reasons I have for regretting you.

"You can write to me in all safety. My letters are given directly to myself alone, not even to my faithful Sophie. Dread of having to pay the carriage of letters prevents my being asked if I have had any. The Archbishop paid for mine and Sophie's places in the diligence, certainly very civil of him."

Madame de Ferriol had her freakish impulses of affection towards the girl she had brought up and whom she understood so little—moods that came as a surprise upon Aissé. Upon her return from Geneva she is told that Madame had been in a great state of anxiety about her health during her stay with Madame Calandrini, and had kept repeating apprehensively:

" 'Aissé was ill when she went away; she must have fever, or she has the small-pox'—for d'Argental had only lately recovered.

"Her trouble on my account," Aissé says, "seemed as great as it was for her son's. Her maid told Sophie that Madame would not spend the winter with her brother at Embrun without me, and that the dread of my not being willing to go there prevented her from thinking of it. Conceive, Madame, that after the way in which she acts to me she should regard it as a misfortune to be separated from me!

"We leave in a fortnight to go to Ablon. Madame

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

de Ferriol will be there for ten or twelve days. . . . I am going to Sens to see you know whom. I shall stay there as long as I can. . . . This year I shall have seen all who are dear to me. . . . Adieu, Madame ; my thoughts and soul are devoted to you."

The poor mother describes that long-looked-for meeting with her child:

" You have asked me for an exact account of my return to Paris and of my stay at Sens.

" I found la petite very tall, but very pale. Her face is noble, she is well made ; she has the most beautiful eyes that you have ever seen ; but she has an air of delicacy

" The pauvre petite is wildly devoted to me ; she was so overcome with joy at seeing me that she almost made herself ill. You can judge of what I felt in seeing her. My emotion was very keen, the more so because it was necessary to hide it. She told me a hundred times that the day of my arrival was a very happy one for her. She would not leave me, yet when I sent her away she went with great docility. She listened to my advice and appeared resolved to profit by it. She did not try to excuse her faults after the way of children. Alas ! the poor little thing, when I was to go away, was so full of sorrow that I dared not look at her, she moved me so much ; she could not speak.

" I took the Abbess with me to see Madame de Bolingbroke, who was at Rheims, where she had been very ill, and who intended to go from there to Paris. All the convent was in tears at the departure of the Abbess, and the poor little one said:

" ' For me, Madame, I am as sorry as the others to see you go, but I believe that it is necessary, and that Madame de Bolingbroke will be very glad to see you and that the sight

Ashes of Roses

of you will do her good ; it is that which consoles me a little for your departure.' And then the pauvre petite was overcome. She seated herself on a chair, having no strength to stand, and embraced me, saying, ' It is a curious contretemps, my good friend, for you would be staying here longer. I have neither father nor mother ; be my mother, I implore you ; I love you as much as if you were.' You may imagine, my dear Madame, the embarrassment this caused me. . . .

" I stayed fifteen days, and my rheumatism seized me there. My whole body was crippled with it. For two days she never left me. She remained five hours, by the clock, at the head of my bed, without wanting to quit it. She read to me to amuse me, and then she conversed with me. If I dozed off a moment she was so afraid of awakening me that she scarcely dared breathe. A person of thirty could not have been more attentive. Mademoiselle de Noailles wanted her to go and play ; she begged to be excused, not wishing to leave me. In short, Madame, I am certain that if she had the happiness of being known to you, you would love her dearly. Madame de Bolingbroke wishes to take her away with her and have the care of her future, which afflicts terribly him of whom you know. He is mad about it.

" I cannot express to you his joy at my return. All that the fervour of a strong passion could prompt him to say and do he has said and done."

And there follows a significant sentence suggestive of Madame Calandrini's method of undermining the citadel of Aïssé's heart.

" If this be a rôle, it is very well played. He has come back to me several times after long and tiring hunting expeditions. Indeed, the King said to him the last time, when he asked leave to go (for he has to ask it directly of

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

the King), what it was that occupied him so much in Paris. He was disconcerted at the question and blushed. He could only reply that he had business there."

"I confess," Aïssé adds in another place, "that I was delightfully surprised yesterday when I saw him come into my room. I was not expecting him. What joy if I might love him without reproaching myself! But alas, I shall never be so happy as that!"

It is easy to see that everyone makes demands upon the amiable Circassian, who is thankful for the distraction from her own miserable struggles. Poor Lady Bolingbroke is much worse; her husband, detained in England, now that the King's pardon has reinstated him in his old home, and only able to rush to and fro, is in the wildest state of alarm about her.

"For three months," Aïssé recounts, "I have been a sick nurse. Madame de Bolingbroke has been very ill. I have seen her suffer so much that several times I thought she would die in my arms. She is actually in a very languishing condition. She eats almost nothing, and her want of appetite would be enough to reduce a person in health to the last pitch. She is always in a slow fever, there are moments in which one fears that she will go out like a candle. She has great courage; it is that which sustains her. You would not believe when hearing her talk sometimes that she was ill, except by her thinness, which is extreme. The machine weakens every day. She has eaten a little these two days. . . . Silva and Chirac, her physicians, do not understand her malady. . . ."

That is the last picture that Aïssé draws of her dear Marquise. But Marie Claire Bolingbroke recovers; it is her marvellous courage, her unselfishness, the inextinguishable flame of the spirit burning in that

Ashes of Roses

delicate body, which sustains her for many years. She rejoins her husband at Dawley. Thus she who has been so much to Aissé is not near her at the end. One gets vivid glimpses of her frail *spirituelle* form flitting through later English memoirs; she belongs to France no more. The second of the astrologer's predictions becomes verified. She has experienced the great passion and she dies in a land foreign to her birth. Those who care to read the epitaph Harry St John wrote on the one lasting love of his life will find it upon the Bolingbroke monument in that old church with the river wall at Battersea. He survived her but a year. For those two the roses of Ablon never faded.

There is a grim little portrait which about this time Aissé gives of Madame de Ferriol:

"Madame de Ferriol obstinately refuses to apply any remedies for a swelling which is spreading over her face. She is so greatly changed, that if you met her you would not recognise her. She is threatened with apoplexy and with dropsy, and becomes so numbed that when she has been half an hour seated she cannot get up again. She sleeps everywhere. The illness of her Maréchal makes her a little more alert; she is greatly afflicted by it."

One may judge that now Madame la Présidente only vegetates, but in so sad and so soured a fashion that no one can put up with her. All the world abandons her on account of her cross tempers. The Maréchal, loaded with years and infirmities, has given up the Court and retired into private life away from Paris. Angélique de Ferriol is indifferent to everything except to that one long-surviving sentiment.

So life frets itself away in the big shabby house in the Rue Neuve Saint Augustin, Aissé's conflict between love

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

and duty never ceasing. The moralist at Geneva allows no respite. There is but one cause for gladness—the Chevalier's health is better. Aïssé writes to her friend:

"I long that there might be no further combat between my reason and my heart and that I might get full enjoyment of the pleasure I have in seeing him. But alas! that can be never! My body is weakened by the agitation of my mind. . . . My health is greatly disturbed."

A little later: .

"I have been very unwell for six weeks. . . . I am emaciated and weak, very weak. . . . Adieu, Madame. Love me a little, always, and believe that no one loves you more tenderly or esteems and honours you more entirely."

The pathos of it! A helpless creature being done to death on the rack and kissing the hand of her executioner! Aïssé has ever so many pretty ways of testifying her devotion to the woman who is slowly killing her. She has her portrait made in pastels for a gift to her friend; now she copies out for her a set of verses; now it is a little tortoise-shell snuff-box of flame colour that she sends her. But there comes another turn of the screw. This time the torturer goes a little too far. The victim suddenly shows fight. Aïssé will not be forced into renunciation. Half rebellious, half reproachful, she makes her last poor protest:

"I am troubled by your last letter. You accuse me very unjustly of not loving you, and you add that when we love we adopt the sentiments and modes of thought of our friends. Alas, Madame, unfortunately I met you too late! What I have told you a thousand times I repeat."

Ashes of Roses

From the first moment that I knew you I have felt towards you the strongest confidence and friendship. It is a sincere pleasure to me to open my heart to you. I have blushed in confiding to you all my weaknesses; you alone have developed my soul; it was born to be virtuous. You who are without pedantry, understanding the world yet not hating it, and knowing how to weigh circumstances, and forgive—you are aware of my faults and do not despise me for them. I appeared to you an object of pity—one who was guilty without realising that she was so. Happily, it is to the refinements of passion that I owe the desire to know goodness.

"I am full of failings, yet I respect and I love goodness. . . . But my passion is strong and everything justifies it. It seems to me that I should be an ingrate—that for the sake of that dear little one I ought to keep the Chevalier's friendship. She is the bond which establishes our love and often makes me regard that love as a duty. If you are just, believe that it is not possible for me to love you more than I do. No, you do not doubt it. . . .

"I love you as my mother, my sister, my daughter. . . . My attachment combines every sentiment—respect, admiration, gratitude, nothing can ever efface such friendship from my heart. . . . Do not say any more things that afflict me."

Then it would appear that after this there is a certain drawing apart of the two friends—that Madame Calandrini stands upon her offended dignity, and puts down her weapons in view of later and more effective assault, for in the letters following this one Aissé makes no allusion to this question nearest both their hearts. The outburst seems to have done her good, for the flickering candle sends up a new jet of flame. She writes animatedly of Paris gossip; the correspondence continues, if with a shade of greater formality than

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

before. She gives a long account of the death of Adrienne Lecouvreur, of the part taken in it by Madame la Duchesse de Bouillon, of the trust reposed in d'Argental and M. Berthier's complimentary comment thereon, some pretty nothings about Madame la Duchesse de Saint Pierre and others of the great world; of the miracles said to take place at the tomb of the Abbé Paris; of the opera *Callirhoe*, of the perennial quarrels of Le Maure and la Pelissier, and of the transference of Monsieur d'Argental's affections to another—Aïssé becomes ceremonious when it is a question of d'Argental's relations with the ladies of the Opera! Somewhat formal also in her compliments to the circle at Geneva and in allusions to the happy visit she had made there, and her hopes that it may be repeated should Madame de Ferriol carry out her frequently-altered intentions of another stay at Château Pont de Veyle. But there is no allusion to the Chevalier, to the *pauvre petite*, or to the whip of conscience with which Madame de Calandrini had scourged Aïssé's heart. The girl speaks of her slow convalescence, of the length of her malady—she had been very ill—but on her anxieties concerning her lover she is silent. The silence is not broken until some unjust reproaches on the part of Madame Calandrini, touching a scandalous report that is afloat of tender relations between the Duc de Gesvres and the fair Circassian, rouse Aïssé to speak frankly. She indignantly repudiates the scandal, giving the true history of her childish *amours* with the Duc de Gesvres—her infantile confession of *le gros péché*, and then:

"You may know that I am really wounded and angered by the suspicions which you have of me. It must be that you did not love me as well as I flattered myself that you did. What ~~Mademoiselle~~ could think me



Ashes of Roses

capable of deceiving you ! I have made you the avowal of all my weaknesses—they are very great ; but never have I been able to love one whom I could not esteem. If my reason had not power to conquer my passion, my heart could only be seduced by goodness, or that which had the appearance of it. I admit with sorrow that you cannot drag from my heart its deepest love, but be assured that I feel all my obligations towards you and that I shall never change in the tender feelings I have for you. My gratitude to you equals my friendship and esteem. You are the most amiable and worthy person whom I know. I protest that I am very far from seeking to break the confidence I have in you. The Chevalier loves and respects you infinitely. He was much affected when I spoke of the misfortune it was to me to be separated from you ; and whatever dread he may have of losing me, his esteem for you outweighs it. When I related to him the conversations I had had with you, I made him weep, and all he said was, ' Alas, I have run terrible risks.' He seemed very uneasy lest my affection for him had been weakened, feeling that after all it well might be. He thanked me afterwards in the most touching fashion for loving him still.'

The constraint broken and her pen started, Aïssé lets it run freely again on the one dear topic :

" His attachment becomes stronger every day. My illness caused him such terrible anxiety that all the world pitied him. In truth, you would have wept at it, as I did, Madame. He was horribly afraid that I might die ; it was not possible, he said, that he could stand up against that misfortune. His grief was so great that I hid my sufferings as well as I could to console him. He had always tears in his eyes. I dared not look at him. Madame de Ferriol asked me one day if I had bewitched him. I answered that the only charm I had used was to love him

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

in spite of myself and to make life to him the sweetest possible.

"Envy made her ask the question, and malice made me reply to it. There, Madame, is what you have asked me. My heart is laid bare. I keep silence on my feelings of remorse. My conscience gives them birth; he and my passion stifle them. Some rays of hope concerning an end, a conclusion, help to delude me, but it is out of my power to abandon them. Adieu, Madame, I cannot go on longer. This is a long letter for me, weak as I am."

The simple script, taken up after gradually lengthening intervals, tells its story of consumption, not then declared, and which, under happier conditions, might no doubt have been cured. Aïssé says that the physicians do not understand her malady. It is but too evident that a tortured mind preys heavily upon an enfeebled body, which the crude medical methods of the day—copious bleeding and purging being the chief—weakened beyond power of resistance.

It would be interesting to know exactly in what measure the psychological methods of Madame Calandrini aided the process of slow murder. There is no suggestion of the two having met since that memorable stay at Geneva, when Madame Calandrini had almost succeeded in persuading poor erring Aïssé to tear her heart out of her bosom and lay it as an expiatory offering on the altar of her offended God, since only by such sacrifice, represented this austere moralist, could He who is—oh, strange paradox!—Himself a God of Love! be appeased for her violation of the law which man, not God, had created.

The pitiful plaint continues :

"I can get no sleep. I have been twenty-four hours without closing an eyelid, and very often I do not go to sleep till seven in the morning."

Ashes of Roses

Then, with a faint dash of feminine vanity, she proceeds to comment on her changed looks :

"The alteration in me does not appear so great when I am dressed. I am not yellow, but very pale : my eyes are not bad : with my hair arranged forward I still look fairly well, but the déshabillé is not becoming, and my poor arms, which, even in their embonpoint, were always flat and ugly, are like two laths.

"You would have been flattered at the kindness shown by everyone for a person whom you honour with your affection, could you have seen what went on while I was in danger. There were two of my friends in the room who could not contain themselves. All that has been told me since. Poor Sophie has suffered everything that it is possible to suffer. She was afraid of alarming me . . . she did all she could not to cry. You know how pious she is, and she was very uneasy about my soul, so much so that Silva was furious at their not having confessed me.

"It is true that without knowing for certain that I was in danger I had asked it of Madame de Ferriol, who made another scene. She is in her dotage. She could think of nothing but Jansenism. At that moment, instead of trying a little to give me confidence, she seized excitedly upon the first word I said to force me into having her confessor and no other. I answered her in a manner that would have made any other person shrink into herself. I must confess that just then I was more angry than frightened, but all I said to her was of no avail : it was throwing pearls before swine. She could feel nothing but the pleasure of stealing my confession for a Jansenist : the triumph of that made her insolent, and she said such cruel things about Sophie for not having thought of her confessor that her own woman burst into tears, saying that she and Sophie were wretched enough to need consolation rather than scolding—that my maid, it is true,

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

had had more love for my life than for my soul, but had reproached herself for her negligence. . . . What do you think of this scene, and of the tenderness of that good lady? But it is of a piece of her character. If it had been necessary to go for four hours on foot to obtain a remedy for me, she would have done it with joy, but for delicate consideration—no! She made much of the anger which she pretended her brother would feel were I to die in the hands of a Jansenist—a thing I don't believe he would have cared about in the least, but she feared that he would have borne her a grudge for it, and might have disinherited her. You will say that I imagine all this: no, in truth I have lived too long with her not to know. . . . I attribute it to an unsympathetic soul, an apoplectic body, and a mind in its dotage. It will never make me forget my obligations to her. . . . I will give her back all the care that I owe her at the expenditure even of my own blood. . . ."

Someone tells Aïssé of the happy marriage of two of her Genevese friends. There comes a little cry from her soul:

"Ah! the happy country which you inhabit, where one marries when one knows how to love, and where people love still!"

Again there is a slow amendment. Those who care for her do not know how to make sufficient demonstration of their affection; they bring her offerings of every kind. It is winter, but one can see the room filled with flowers. The embroidery-frame is in its place, but usually Aïssé lies propped up with cushions on the green-and-white settee beneath the window. Sometimes, however, she is able to spin or to work a little, and kind Madame de Parabère brings her silks so that she may

Ashes of Roses

not have to buy them. Warm-hearted, wicked, worldly Madame de Parabère, she never comes empty-handed. Now it is a snuff-box of red jasper set in gold; now she leaves on the toilet-table a piece of charming taffetas *broché*, for she has noticed that Aïssé is wearing her last year's gowns. Another time it is a painted canvas. Her coach, her servants, everything she possesses, is at Aïssé's service. She shuts herself up, day by day, in Aïssé's sick-room, giving up gaiety, lovers, everything which formerly occupied and delighted her, so that she may solace the last hours of her friend. Aïssé tells Madame Calandrini all these things about Madame de Parabère, who, if one may judge by the former deprecatory tone of Aïssé's remarks upon the good heart of this scarlet woman of Babylon, has not been approved of by the moralist at Geneva. But no one who knew her could help feeling a kindly tolerance for the moral shortcomings of Madame de Parabère. There is a certain unconscious irony in Aïssé's propitiatory plea for the Magdalen to the woman whom she regarded as the highest exemplar of feminine virtue. After the list of Madame de Parabère's kindnesses to her, the girl continues:

"Indeed she does not like me to love other people as much as her, except the Chevalier and you: she says it is right that you should have the preference: and we often talk of you. I have given her a great idea of my friend. Might it please God that she resembled you in some of your virtues."

Madame du Deffand comes frequently also. The dark old room echoes with witty talk. There is Fontenelle too, like an old Roman, with his grimly, humorous face, delivering himself of sarcastic comment upon the miracles at the Abbé Paris's tomb. "*Mankind loves the marvellous,*" says he, "*and the more ridiculous and*

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

illogical the creed, the more followers does it find." Good Berthier hangs about. Aïssé complains to Madame Calandrini that he places himself in a certain armchair dedicated to her absent friend. Aïssé says nothing to Berthier, but she does not like it. Poor Berthier ! it was not given him to understand Aïssé. But Voltaire, who also visits the dying woman, sees everything out of those needle-point eyes of his and understands well enough all that followed upon the breaking of the Ambassador's pearl chain; his notes to the first edition of Mademoiselle Aïssé's letters make it clear that he was fully acquainted with the tragedy behind the fair Circassian's life. Voltaire has been grinding his axe assiduously. He now indulges in *amours* with great ladies whose taste is to the *bizarre*. His *Henriade*, approved by my lord Bolingbroke, has had an enormous success in England. He is rich enough to buy himself a peruke as big as Berthier's. "The little rat" has become a person of importance.

Naturally, among Aïssé's regular callers are her adopted brothers, who both have chambers near—Pont de Veyle, punctilious in courtesy, invariably rejoiced to meet Madame du Deffand, and d'Argental, who feels acutely the impending loss of the sister whose champion he had once declared himself. In such disposition of her small property as affects the de Ferriols, Aïssé clings to d'Argental. She has told him everything about the *pauvre petite* at Sens, who has "neither father nor mother," and he has promised to befriend little Célénie should anything happen to the Chevalier.

Most pathetic figure of all in that group stands the Chevalier, fighting helplessly against the inward conviction of doom. For though Aïssé tries to comfort him with false hopes of her recovery, he knows only too well that the fiat has gone forth, and that soon the great Darkness will close round his beloved. In his

Ashes of Roses

despair he showers gratuities upon the members of the de Ferriol household, even Aïssé's cow, for which he buys hay. For milk is all that she can now swallow. He gives one servant the wherewithal to teach that servant's child a trade; to another he gives the price of ribbons and fur tippets. When Aïssé asks him what is the use of all that? he answers that it is to make them take more care of her. He is afraid that Madame de Ferriol's sordid spirit of economy may deny her the luxuries he desires to lavish upon her, and he persecutes her to accept from him a hundred pistoles. To pacify him Aïssé does so, but she puts them in charge of someone—probably d'Argental—to be returned to him after her death.

Everyone is good to her. As she lies in the Ambassador's great bed—now she is too weak to leave it—with the benignant carved face of the angel bending over her pillow, she is enveloped by the tenderness of her friends. Her faithful Sophie never leaves her by day or night. The Chevalier, in his royal generosity not daring to offer Sophie money, torments himself to find her excuses for the spending of it. He stamps his foot in vexation at his own lack of ingenuity and envies the men who can invent gallantries. Aïssé longs to tell him, but dares not yet, how little can human aid avail her. Only for his sake does she fear the King of Terrors.

The end is nearer than any realise, but we all know how in consumption the expiring flame gives forth unexpected gleams.

"They tell me that I am better," writes Aïssé, "not that I find any relief, 'Je crache des horreurs.' I only sleep by artificial means: I get every day thinner and weaker. I cannot say that my bodily condition is painful—a little oppression and malaise; otherwise my malady

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

is not acute. As for the pains of the soul, they are cruel. I cannot tell you how much the sacrifice I am making costs me : it is killing me. But I trust in the mercy of God for strength. One cannot deceive Him, and as He knows my desire to do right and all that I feel, He will help me through.

"At last I have made my decision. As soon as I can go out of doors I will make the confession of my sins. I want to have no ostentation, and I shall change very little in my outward conduct. I have reasons for acting secretly. First on account of Madame de Ferriol, who would insist upon my having a Jansenist director, and Madame de Tencin, who would intrigue for that. Besides, Madame would go from house to house picking up all the professional devotees who would overwhelm me. And beyond all that I have to practise discretion in regard to him of whom you know. He has spoken to me on the subject with all possible reasonableness and friendship. All his kind actions, his delicate considerations towards me : his unselfish love for me : the interests of the poor little one to whom we cannot give a legitimate status—all this demands much tact in dealing with him. My remorse has tormented me for a long time. Taking this step will be a support to me. If the Chevalier does not hold to what he has promised me I shall see him no more. These, Madame, are the resolutions which I have made. I do not doubt that they will shorten my life, if they have to be carried to extremity. Never was there passion so inextinguishable, and I can say that it is equally strong on his side. . . . Adieu, Madame, I pique myself, as you see, by my telling you all this, upon your kindness and your indulgence. But be assured that if your Aïssé lives she will render herself worthy of a friendship of which she well appreciates the value."

The letters are now all in the same strain. There is no need for other pen to tell the story.

Ashes of Roses

" You have told me often to give you news of myself. I obey with all my heart, for there is no one in the world whom I esteem and honour as much as you. There is nothing to prevent from indulging in this affection ; it is innocent ; it is just. How should I not love one who has taught me to know virtue and has done everything to make me practise it, who has counterbalanced the strongest passion in me. At last, Madame at last, you will be recompensed for your good work. I am giving myself to my Creator. I am labouring to destroy my passion, and am resolved to abandon my errors. . . ."

" The idea of death afflicts me less than you might imagine. I find myself too happy, in that God has given me grace to know Him again. And I am going to try and profit by the time left me. After all, my dear friend, a little sooner, a little later. What is life ? . . ."

Once more she speaks of the physical alteration in herself.

" You ask me if I am changed. I am very much so. My eyes are a brownish yellow-grey ; the curves of my mouth are sharpened. . . . I am no more than skin and bone. A touch of rouge reanimates me a little, and the face is less altered than might be expected. My lips are not pale—but, in a word, it is a hideous thing, an emaciated body.

" In regard to my soul, I hope that next Sunday it will be cleansed from all impurities. . . ."

For all was ready, and the altar prepared for the final sacrifice. Useless, meaningless, in the material sense, might that sacrifice be deemed. What should a dying woman, whose comeliness had departed from her, and towards whom the desire of man could no more turn—what should such an one need with a mortal lover? Yet which of us—whose eyes cannot pierce the shadows nor his mind discern the ultimate purpose working to

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

its end behind the veil of matter—which of us can even dare guess at the mysterious, far-reaching effect which that last renunciation may have wrought upon Aïssé's eternal destiny!

Ever in her soul—as child, maiden and woman—there had been the unquenchable yearning of the moth for the star. And now, with singed wings and broken heart, the poor, fluttering moth has gained the star at last.

Strange that in this final dedicatory sacrament whereby an erring soul offered up itself to God, it was her two fellow-sinners—the worldling unbeliever and the Magdalen—who took upon themselves the offices of acolyte and server.

"You will be astonished," Aïssé writes, "when I tell you that confidants and the instruments of my conversion are my lover and Mesdames du Deffand and de Parabère. And that the one to whom I have most shrunk from revealing my deepest feelings is she whom I should in this matter regard as my mother. Madame de Parabère will take me on Sunday, and it is Madame du Deffand who herself introduced me to the Père Boursault, of whom you have doubtless heard. He has great intellect and much knowledge of the world and of the human heart. He is wise, and does not vaunt himself upon being a fashionable director.

"You will be surprised, I repeat, at my choice of confidants. They are my guards, and above all Madame de Parabère, who never leaves me, and, neither approving nor disapproving, serves me. Madame du Deffand, without understanding my thoughts or feelings, herself proposed to me this confessor. I do not doubt that all this which takes place under their eyes may light in their souls some spark of conversion. God grant it!"

In one case, at least, Aïssé's prayer was fulfilled.

Ashes of Roses

The Magdalen ended her days in the shadow of a cloister.

It would be sacrilege to try and lift the curtain which Aissé herself has drawn over her parting interview with the Chevalier. She had written her heart out to him in one long last farewell, which she dared not trust herself to speak. He brought his written answer, for neither could he utter the words of renouncement.

Maybe they kissed each other as those kiss

“ . . . whose hearts are wrung ’
When hope and fear are spent,
And nothing is left to give, except
A sacrament.”

For them all was over now, all the passion and the pain. The only thing remaining was the love which cannot die.

After he had left her Aissé read the Chevalier's reply to her own letter of farewell.

In it the man's feelings and his character speak for themselves.

“ Your letter, my dear Aisse, touches me far more than it vexes me. It has an air of truth and a sense of virtue which I cannot resist. I complain of nothing, since you promise to care for me always. I acknowledge that I have not the principles which actuate you ; but, thank God ! I am as far removed from the spirit of proselytism, and I feel that each one has a right to follow the light of his own conscience. Be tranquil, be happy, my dear Aisse, no matter by what means ; they will always seem endurable to me, provided that they do not banish me from your heart. My conduct will show you that I deserve your kindness. Ah ! why could you not love me longer ?— since it is your sincerity, the purity of your soul, your virtue itself which attaches me to you. I have told you so a thousand

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

times, and you will see that I do not deceive you, but it is just that you should wait until results have proved to you the truth of what I say in order to believe it ? Do you not know me well enough to have in me that confidence which truth always inspires in those who are capable of feeling it ?

" Be persuaded from this moment that I love you, my dear Aïssé, as tenderly as it is possible to love, as purely as you yourself could desire ; believe, above all, that I am further than you yourself from contracting any other tie. I feel that there should be nothing lacking to my happiness so long as you permit me to see you, and to flatter myself that you regard me as the man who in all the world is most closely allied to you.

" I shall see you to-morrow, and it will be I myself who shall give you this letter. I have preferred to write this rather than say it, for I could not speak of the matter to you without losing command of myself. I feel it still too keenly. But I want to be that only which you wish me to be, and in the part that you have chosen it is enough that I should assure you of my submission to your will, and of the constancy of my attachment under all the limitations which you desire to put upon it, without letting you see the tears which I could not prevent from flowing, but which I disavow since you assure me that I shall always have your friendship. I venture to believe that, my dear Aïssé, not only because I know that you are sincere, but still more because I am convinced that it is impossible for an affection so tender, so faithful, so full of delicacy as mine, not to make the impression that it ought to make on a heart like yours."

The end comes very soon after Father Boursault has received her confession. She has strength only to write and tell Madame Calandrini that she is calm, happy and reconciled to God, that her friend's wishes on her behalf have been fulfilled, that she has done all that

Ashes of Roses

Madame Calandrimi desired. Again she speaks of the goodness of all around her; she commends her faithful Sophie to the care of her friends. She has the consolation of having left Sophie enough to buy bread. Of the nobility, the delicacy, the generosity of the Chevalier's passion she cannot speak; it may be that she only understood it fully at the last. But she is no longer troubled about "*la pauvre petite*"; she feels that the little one has a friend and protector who will love her tenderly.

And Aissé's faith in this respect was fully justified. After her death the Chevalier dedicated all the remaining years of his life to her memory and to the care of their child. Some eight years from that time, in sending Aissé's portrait to their daughter, Célénie, Vicomtesse de Nanthia, he writes:

"You will see the lines of her face; how could one paint the qualities of her soul! The tender remembrance that I cherish of her should to you be a sure guarantee that I shall love you, ma chère petite, all my life."

It is impossible to help wondering why Madame Calandrimi did not continue to make the journey from Switzerland to Paris in order to be with Aissé during some part of her illness, but she did not.

These closing words of Aissé's farewell letter to the friend to whom she had offered up all that was dearest to her sound the dying cry of Aissé's lacerated heart.

"Adieu, ma chère Madame. I have no more strength to write. There is still for me an infinite sweetness in the thought of you, but I may not dwell upon this. . . ."

"The life which I have led has been very wretched. Have I ever known an instant of true satisfaction? I

The Romance of Mademoiselle Aïssé

could never bear to be alone with myself ; I was afraid to think, and I only ceased to suffer from my remorse when my eyes were opened to my mistakes. Why should I dread the separation of my soul from my flesh now when I know that God is all goodness, and that the moment when I shall first enjoy true happiness will be that in which I shall quit this poor body. . . ."

The pen falls from the feeble hand. Only one more record remains of Mademoiselle Aïssé's pathetic life. It is the register of her death and her burial in the parish church of St Roch, dated the fourteenth of March, in the year of our Lord seventeen hundred and thirty-three :

"Charlotte Elizabeth Aïssé, spinster, aged about forty, deceased yesterday, Rue Neuve Saint Augustin, in this parish, has been interred in this church, in the tomb in the Chapel of Saint Augustin belonging to M. de Ferriol. Present Messire Antoine de Ferriol de Pont de Veyle, *lecteur ordinaire de la Chambre de Sa Majesté* ; Messire Charles Augustin Ferriol d'Argental, *conseiller au Parlement*, both living in the said street and parish.

"Signed: FERRIOL DE PONT DE VEYLE.
FERRIOL D'ARGENTAL.
CONTRASTIN, *vicaire*.

THE END

"In the novels of Curtis Yorke there is an abiding charm."
—Yorkshire Post

The Novels of Curtis Yorke

"Curtis Yorke, in her many novels, has a happy gift for portraying the tender emotions. There is always a charm about Curtis Yorke's books—partly because she has the gift of natural, sympathetic dialogue."

—The Times

WAYWARD ANNE	With Coloured Frontispiece	Library Edition, 6/-
---------------------	----------------------------	----------------------

MOLLIE DEVERILL	With Coloured Frontispiece	Library Edition 6/-
------------------------	----------------------------	---------------------

THE OTHER SARA	With Coloured Frontispiece	Library Edition 6/-
-----------------------	----------------------------	---------------------

THEIR MARRIAGE	With Coloured Frontispiece	Library Edition 6/-
-----------------------	----------------------------	---------------------

ONLY BETTY	With Coloured Frontispiece	Library Edition 6/-
-------------------	----------------------------	---------------------

THE WORLD AND DELIA		Library Edition 6/-
----------------------------	--	---------------------

THE GIRL AND THE MAN		Library Edition 6/-
-----------------------------	--	---------------------

IRRESPONSIBLE KITTY	Library Edition Popular Edition, 6d.	6/-
----------------------------	---	-----

ALIX OF THE GLEN	Library Edition Popular Edition, 6d.	6/-
-------------------------	---	-----

OLIVE KINSELLA		Library Edition 6/-
-----------------------	--	---------------------

DELPHINE	Library Edition Popular Edition, 6d.	6/-
-----------------	---	-----

THE GIRL IN GREY	Library Edition Popular Edition, 6d.	6/-
-------------------------	---	-----

A FLIRTATION WITH TRUTH	New Library Edition	2/6
--------------------------------	------------------------	-----

"Whether grave or gay, Curtis Yorke is a *raconteur* whose imagination and vivacity are unflagging. Few, moreover, have in the same degree the versatility which enables her to provoke peals of laughter and move almost to tears. The writer is natural, realistic and entertaining."

—Morning Post

London: JOHN LONG, 12, 13 and 14 Norris St., Haymarket

THE AUTHOR WITH THE LARGEST PUBLIC

The Sales of Nat Gould's Novels exceed
6,000,000 (six million) Copies!

Nat Gould's New Novels

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

MESSRS JOHN LONG, Ltd, are now the Sole Publishers of all Mr Nat Gould's New Novels, with Cover Designs in *three* colours by Mr HARRINGTON BIRD, the well-known horse-painter. From July 1909 all these will be published at the outset at 1s net, picture paper cover, and 2s. cloth gilt, crown 8vo. The Novels will be of the same length as heretofore, and below are the first four in the new series —

THE STOLEN RACER	Ready	THE ROARER	Feb 1910
A RECKLESS OWNER	Ready	THE LUCKY SHOE	May 1910

Nat Gould's New Sixpenny Novels

In large demy 8vo, sewed. Striking cover in colours

ONE OF A MOB	Ready	THE PET OF THE PUBLIC	Ready
THE SELLING PLATER	Ready	CHARGER AND CHASER	Ready
A BIT OF A ROGUE	Ready	THE CHANCE OF A LIFETIME	Ready
THE LADY TRAINER	Ready	A STROKE OF LUCK	Ready
A STRAIGHT GOER	Ready	THE TOP WEIGHT	Ready
A HUNDRED TO ONE CHANCE	Ready	THE DAPPLE GREY	Jan 1910
A SPORTING SQUATTER	Ready	WHIRLWIND'S YEAR	April 1910

SEVENTH YEAR OF PUBLICATION

NAT GOULD'S ANNUAL, 1909

THE PICK OF THE STABLE

Price 2s., large demy 8vo, 160 pages, sewed, cover in picture paper

London: JOHN LONG, Ltd., 11-14, Norris St., Finsbury Market